

*Most Reverend José H. Gomez, S.T.D.*

*Theology on Tap – October 5, 2005*

## **Immigration**

"If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself ... for you were once strangers yourselves." With these words the Lord, through Moses, settled the immigration debate of the Old Testament days. (Leviticus, 19:34)

“When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? ... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 38,45)

(from OSV article – 02/16/03)

The first issue to address in immigration is respect for the dignity of the human person. One of the ways we reflect that is how we treat one another. Second, the social teachings of the Church recognize the fact that the earth belongs to the human race, so we have some right to move all over the world, at least in conceptual theory. From Genesis, we know God created us in His image and likeness to collaborate with Him in the work of creation. We all have the right to work.

Clearly, nations have the right to control their borders as a way of protecting the identity of the people in that country. The two things should go together, although it is difficult at times to make them compatible. Sometimes, the emphasis is on control of the borders, as it is now as a consequence of Sept. 11.

## **The numbers of immigration**

It is unquestionable that the arrival of Hispanic immigrants, especially Mexicans, is a challenge for the United States. The numbers are eloquent.

Hispanics or Latinos (authorities of the United States Census use both terms), according to numbers of 2002, are 37.4 millions and represent 13.3 per cent of the American population. Of the total of the Hispanic population, 66.9 per cent are from Mexican origin, 14.3 from Central and South America, 8.6 from Puerto Rico, 3.7 are Cubans, and the remaining 6.5 from other Hispanic origins, including Spain.

According to the same census, 26.5 per cent of Hispanic homes are formed by five or more people, while only 10.8 per cent of Anglo homes had the same amount of members.

The average Anglo home has between two and three members.

Even though the United States has always been a country of immigrants, the volume of Hispanic population, which has no precedents or comparison with any other wave of immigration in the past, shows the complexity of the assimilation of this population, of their appropriate integration into society without putting their values at risk, and it explains why some expressions of xenophobia appear, in some cases out of fear (when some people see Hispanic labor as a “risk” for their own jobs), or in other cases, more dangerous expressions of xenophobia.

Every immigration wave in North America has marked in a definitive way the identity of the United States, but they have also faced traditionally the resistance of those who already lived in the country.

However, today there is a more articulate ideological resistance, more organic, maybe more “politically correct”, but intellectually and politically more sophisticate.

The most important expression of this prejudice is maybe the book “Who we Are” of Samuel Huntington, a man of great influence in the thinking circles of the North

American political parties, and at the same time, one of those who puts forward a deeper problem: the theory that Hispanics, if they keep their identity and continue arriving in the same volume, will “destroy” the achievements of the United States, which are unique in terms of freedom and well-being.

In summary, Hispanics are the enemies of the identity and the achievements that made the United States the potency that it is today.

This sensation of “threat” divides even the Catholic population of North America: there are those who feel that immigrants must be alienated, sent back to their places of origin; others believe that they should live isolated, because they do not “respect” the traditions of the Catholic North American structure; and only a minority believes that they must be assimilated and that their respectful integration will mean a benefit for the nation and the Church.

## **The reality: Hispanics and the economy**

Before being appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Denver, the pastoral work I held until a little more than a year ago, when I was appointed Archbishop of San Antonio, I served for 14 years as a priest in Texas.

George W. Bush was the governor for some of that time, and it was easy for me to understand why the voting Hispanics of the state supported him so strongly in the 2000 presidential elections. In fact, as governor, he understood that the United States is a nation built upon the foundations of immigration. This is one of our greatest strengths. And for this reason also, Nativism – that is “America for Americans” – has never worked. Nativism assumes that the economic pie of America is small and that its culture is shaped in cement.

But the history of the United States shows exactly the opposite. Immigrants play the largest part. They create health, bring new energies and ideas, and they keep the country competitive. Besides that, they take the part that no one wants. The more successful the United States are, the more it invites foreigners to come looking to build a new life. And that is logic... and there is nothing wrong with it. Besides that, at this moment in the United States, March of 2006, the economy depends on the work of millions of undocumented immigrants, many of them from Latin America. In many places, agriculture would not survive without the work of their hands. Also, the great majority of these immigrants does not represent by any means a threat for national security. They are people who simply want to make a living in works that are already suffering from a severe scarcity of labor.

For the majority of the “illegal” Mexicans the issue is very simple: the United States needs workers, and they want to work. Why is it so incomprehensible to extend to these workers a reasonable protection under the law?

As the Bishops of the United States have pointed out, to legalize undocumented immigrants makes sense for several important reasons.

Legalization would help rather than harm national security. To take undocumented immigrants out of alienation will allow the American government to handle in a much better way who is in the United States, and to analyze why they are there. Legalization would not rob work from American citizens. Instead, it would help people who are already contributing to their economy.

Legalization would help families to stay together, and to maintain the well-being of children who are already American citizens. Most undocumented families have at least one child who is an American citizen and other children and a parent who are not.

Legalization would help Latin America to have a greater development and stability. Immigrants in the United States sent 20 billion dollars to their countries in the year 2000. Many of these immigrants are Latin American, and their resources are vital for the economy in Latin America.

Legalization doesn't mean, as critics point out, to reward law offenders, or to harm immigrants who are already soliciting their visas. The United States' current policies invite illegal immigration when they impose upon spouses and children of legal permanent residents at least 5 years of wait before they can reunite with their loved ones. This is a defeatist measure, and unrealistic. There is no logical reason why policies could not be adapted so they would assist both, immigrants seeking visas through the regular ways and undocumented immigrants.

Finally, legalization could place the United States' immigration policy in conformity with their economic policy. We cannot reasonably foster freedom of interaction with Latin America through treaties like NAFTA, which encourages immigration, and then to take energetic measures to avoid it when it happens.

## **Cultural contribution**

President Ronald Reagan, in a speech addressed to Hispanics, thanked for their presence in the United States, pointing out that thanks to them “life in our country is less boring”.

This is the vision that many have regarding the cultural contribution of Hispanics to the United States: Cinco de Mayo, fiesta, siesta, tacos, burritos and chili.

This vision responds to a simplistic and commercialized of Hispanic culture. Reality is much more complex than this, and the Hispanic contribution is much more important and deeper than we see on TV.

According to the “National Survey of Latinos”, held by the Pew Foundation and Kaiser Foundation in 2002, this is the way in which Hispanics see the United State sin comparison with their countries of origin:

89% believe that opportunities are better in the United States.

68% believe that the treatment given to poor people is more fair than in their countries of origin; only 28% believes that the US is better in terms of fundamental moral values of the person and society; and only 21 % believes that it is better to maintain family ties.

However, according to the same survey, 68% of Hispanics of first generation trust that their children will maintain their same moral values; and 56 % trust that their children will be able to maintain the family united.

In other words, Hispanics recognize that there is a certain moral weakness in the North American culture, but they are optimistic regarding their own ability to positively influence it.

That means, Hispanics constitute an important moral reserve. If we consider that that has precisely been the moral foundation upon which the great achievements of the United States were built, it is clear that, regarding Europe, for instance, Hispanics are nothing else but a gift for North America.

The United States were always a nation of immigrants. This is our strength. People come from northern Mexico and other Latin American countries to work here and they share with the United States a common continent, a common religiosity and a common moral heritage, as well as a common desire to build a better life.

This is an opportunity, not a threat. For this reason, amidst the understandable precautions raised by the events of September 11, the United States cannot allow itself to tolerate the chauvinism that is behind so many critics to undocumented work. To tolerate it not only economically; but especially morally, because this is an issue that has a direct impact, and very costly, in hundreds of thousands of individuals and families.

Fairly, as this event that gathers us shows us, the issue of immigration is deeply connected with the issue of globalization.

The world is becoming small, weather we like it or not. The question is if the United States and in general, the great rich nations who receive immigrants, will be able to take advantage of this unstoppable phenomenon, recognizing the opportunities that it presents as well as regulating the defects or problems brought about by it, such as the incorporation of a different culture, of a different language or of a human traffic that presents legitimate questions of security.

The United States, as we know, is the first world receptor of immigrants. But differently from what happened in Europe, the immigrants that have arrived and continue arriving here have always shared a Christian ethos, even when they were not Protestants, as it was in the case of the Irish, Italians and Mexicans.

Each time the United States has had the vision to welcome these groups, its leadership, economic solidity and its creative diversity have been strengthened.

What historical meaning it would have to change the path now?

## **The framework for a Christian response**

In order to set the bases for the rights of immigrants, we don't have to go too far from an ethical perspective. Whoever doesn't believe in the words of Jesus in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Matthew: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. For I was a stranger and you welcomed me", can simply review the article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For us Catholics, paragraph 2241 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church is very clear: "The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the *foreigner* in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him. Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens."

And then, number 2433 points out that "*Access to employment and to professions must be open to all without unjust discrimination*" and it numbers, among others, the case of immigrants.

In his recent message for the World Day of Migrants, Pope Benedict XVI said that "one of the recognizable signs of the times today is undoubtedly migration, a phenomenon which during the century just ended can be said to have taken on structural characteristics, becoming an important factor of the labour market worldwide, a consequence among other things of the enormous drive of globalization."

I would like to make a quick reference to the visionary concepts mentioned by the Holy Father in this message.

First, the concept of the “sign of the times”: the immigration movement is a reality, but not only this, it is above all an opportunity. But opportunities benefit only those who have the political and moral decision to take advantage of it, as we have already pointed out.

The second concept is that of “structural”: immigrations are a phenomenon particular of our times, of our global reality. To try to stop it with a wall is simply to try to put a barrier not to immigrants, but to history itself. I don’t have to recall, regarding this, what happened to similar walls, such as the great Chinese wall or the French Maginot line.

Finally, the acceptance of the phenomenon of immigration is not the end of the ethical problem posed, but only the beginning. In reality, it is necessary to harmonize immigration with the legitimate regulation that governments make about the arrival of foreigners to their countries.

However, whatever the challenges, we, Christians, cannot get away from a direction that does not give space to doubts or interpretations: “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me”.