

Homily of Cardinal Seán O'Malley  
Mission for Migrants  
Mass on the Border in Nogales, Arizona  
April 1, 2014

For 20 years I worked in Washington D.C. with immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and from all over Latin America. The vast majority did not have the advantage of legal status. Many came to the States in great part fleeing the violence of the civil wars in Central America.

I often share the story of my first days at the 'Centro Católico' when I was visited by a man from El Salvador who sat at my desk and burst into tears as he handed me a letter from his wife back in El Salvador who remonstrated him for having abandoned her and their six children to penury and starvation.

When the man was able to compose himself, he explained to me that he came to Washington, like so many, because with the war raging in his country it was impossible to sustain his family by farming. So a coyote brought him to Washington where he shared a room with several other men in similar circumstances. He washed dishes in two restaurants, one at lunchtime and one at dinnertime. He ate the leftover food on the dirty plates so as to save money. He walked to work so as not to spend any money on transportation, so that he could send all the money he earned back to his family. He said he sent money each week, but now after six months, his wife had not received a single letter from him and accused him of abandoning her and the children. I asked him if he sent check or money orders. He told me that he sent cash. He said: "Each week I put all the money I earn into an envelope with the amount of stamps that I was told and I put it in that blue mailbox on the corner." I looked out the window and I could see the blue mailbox, the problem was it was not a mailbox at all, but a fancy trash bin.

This incident helped me to glimpse the hardships and humiliations of so many immigrants who come to the States fleeing from poverty and oppression, seeking a better life for their children. Sadly enough many immigrants spend years without the opportunity to see their loved ones. How many rural areas are peopled by grandparents taking care of little grandchildren because the parents are off in the United States working to send money back home?

Many of the priests and bishops with me have much more experience of the border. However I did bury one of my parishioners in the desert near Ciudad Juárez who was murdered there. We know that the border is lined with unmarked graves of thousands who die alone and nameless.

Today's Gospel begins with a certain lawyer who is trying to test Jesus. The lawyer is an expert in the laws, but he is hostile to Jesus; he seems to want to know how to attain eternal life, but his

real intent is to best Jesus in a public debate. Jesus responds to the man's question by asking "What stands written in the law?" The lawyer answers artfully with the great commandment: love of God above all else and love of neighbor as oneself.

Jesus says "You answered correctly. Do this and you will live." God's love and love of neighbor is the key to a good life. The amazing thing about the Gospels is how love of God and love of neighbor are intimately connected.

The lawyer is a little embarrassed so he asks another question to appear intelligent and perceptive. The question is so important: "Who is my neighbor?" This wonderful question affords Jesus the occasion to give us one of the great parables of the New Testament – the Parable of the "Good Samaritan".

In Jesus' day the term "Good Samaritan" was never used by the chosen people. Indeed it would seem a contradiction of terms. How could someone be both a Samaritan and good?

The Samaritans were the despised foreigners, heretics and outcasts. Yet Jesus shows us how that foreigner, that Samaritan, becomes the protagonist, the hero who saves one of the native sons who is rescued not by his fellow countryman and coreligionists but by a stranger, an alien, a Samaritan.

Who is my neighbor? Jesus changed the question from one of legal obligation (who deserves my love) to one of gift giving (to whom can I show myself a neighbor), and of this the despised Samaritan is the moral exemplar.

Jesus is showing us that people who belong to God's covenant community, show love that is not limited by friendship and propinquity but a love that has a universal scope and does not look for recompense.

The parables function either to instruct or to shock. This parable was to jolt peoples' imagination, to provoke, to challenge. The usual criteria for evaluating a person's worth are replaced by that of unselfish attention to human need wherever one encounters it.

We come to the desert today because it is the road to Jericho; it is traveled by many trying to reach the metropolis of Jerusalem. We come here today to be a neighbor and to find a neighbor in each of the suffering people who risk their lives and at times lose their lives in the desert.

Pope Francis encourages us to go to the periphery to seek our neighbor in places of pain and darkness. We are here to discover our own identity as God's children so that we can discover who our neighbor is, who is our brother and sister.

As a nation of immigrants we should feel a sense of identification with other immigrant groups seeking to enter our country.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Only the indigenous Native Americans are not from somewhere else. So the word of God reminds us today that our God wants justice for the orphan and the widow and our God loves the foreigners, the aliens and reminds us that we were aliens in Egypt.

Because of the potato famine and political oppression, my people came from Ireland. Thousands upon thousands perished of starvation. On the coffin ships that brought the Irish immigrants, one third of the passengers starved. The sharks followed the ships waiting to devour the bodies of those “buried at sea”. I suspect that only the Africans brought on the slave ships had a worse passage.

Frank McCourt of *Angela's Ashes* fame wrote a play called: “The Irish... how they got that way.” In one of the scenes the Irish immigrants are reminiscing saying: “We came to America because we thought the streets were paved in gold. And when we got here we discovered the streets were not paved in gold, in fact they were not paved at all, and we found out we had to pave them.”

The hard work and sacrifices of so many immigrant peoples is the secret of the success of this country. Despite the xenophobic ranting of a segment of the population, our immigrant population contributes mightily to the economy and wellbeing of the United States.

Here in the desert of Arizona, we come to mourn the countless immigrants who risk their lives at the hands of the coyotes and the forces of nature to come to the United States. Every year four hundred bodies are found here at the border, bodies of men, women and children seeking to enter the United States. Those are only the bodies that are found. As the border crossings become more difficult, people take greater risks and more are perishing.

Last year about 25,000 children, mostly from Central America arrived in the US, unaccompanied by an adult. Tens of thousands of families are separated in the midst of migration patterns. More than 10 million undocumented immigrants are exposed to exploitation and lack access to basic human services, and are living in constant fear. They contribute to our economy by their hard work, often by contributing billions of dollars each year to the social security fund and to Medicare programs that will never benefit them.

The author of Hebrews urges us to practice hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels. He urges us to be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment. We

have presently over 30,000 detainees, most of whom have no criminal connections. The cost of these detentions is about \$2 billion a year.

The system is broken and is causing untold suffering and a tenable waste of resources, human and material.

We find in those prisoners, neighbors, fellow human beings who are separated from their families and communities. The sheer volume of the cases has led to many due process violations and arbitrary detentions.

At Lampedusa Pope Francis warned of the globalization of indifference. Pope Francis, speaking at the borders of Europe, not a desert, but a sea, said: “We have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We have fallen into the hypocrisy of the Priest and Levite whom Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan: we see our brother half dead on the side of the road and perhaps we say to ourselves: ‘Poor soul’ and then go our way. It is not our responsibility, and with that we feel reassured, assuaged. The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people living in a soap bubble, indifference to others.”

Our country has been the beneficiary of so many immigrant groups that had the courage and the fortitude to come to America. They came fleeing horrific conditions and harboring a dream of a better life for the children. They were some of the most industrious, ambitious and enterprising citizens of their own countries and brought enormous energy and good will to their new homeland. Their hard work and sacrifices have made this country great.

Often these immigrants have been met with suspicion and discrimination. The Irish were told “they need not apply”; our ethnicity and religion made us undesirable. But America at its best is not the bigotry and xenophobia of the no nothings, but the generous welcome of the New Colossus, that mighty woman with a Torah, the Statue of Liberty, the Mother of Exiles who proclaims to the world:

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp,” cries she with silent lips, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Emma Lazarus)

We must be vigilant that that lamp continues to burn brightly.