

The Church and Migration: Challenges and Opportunities

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Never before has the world seen as much international migration. As the world becomes ever smaller through communications technologies, ease and expanse of transportation, and the globalization of economies, the migration of people is a natural outgrowth. In the past twenty-five years, the number of people residing someplace other than where they were born has more than doubled and now stands at nearly 300 million.

Yet, nations have not fully grasped how to manage and accommodate this migration. Too often, the migration-related policies of countries are dated and designed for a different era and different realities or are simply restrictionist in nature, especially in this era of terrorism. In some regions of the world nations promote open and free market economies, encouraging the exchange of capital, technologies, information, and commerce across international borders, but are ambivalent, at best, about opening greater opportunities for the migration of people.

The Church has long held special interest in the migration of people and has been a voice of support and accompaniment for migrants. From her Biblical roots up to the present day, the pilgrimage and journey toward the Promised Land is a central tenet of the Church's teachings. The rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching confirms the Scriptural injunctions of the right of people to journey in search of fulfillment. At the same time, the Church recognizes the right (even the responsibility) of sovereign states to control their borders. Where and how are these balances

struck? How do nations decide immigration policies, while accommodating the migrants' rights?

The Church's prophetic voice is increasingly critical to these important questions.

This paper reviews the situation of U.S. policies toward migration and the role of the Church in shaping these policies. Recommendations are made for greater collaboration between the bishops of North American and Europe in the field of migration, especially in shaping governmental and international policies toward migrants.

The United States: A Nation of Immigrants, yet Ambivalent about Immigration

Over the past two decades, the United States has witnessed a record number of immigrants. From 1986 to the present, some 20 million immigrants have arrived. However, as a percentage of the total U.S. population, today's immigrants represent a smaller proportion than was the case in the first "great wave" of immigration in the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century. In 1920, for example, the foreign-born population represented 15% of the U.S. population; whereas today's foreign-born comprise about 12%. In a way, the U.S. is less a nation of immigrants today than it was 100 years ago.

Yet, public attitudes and policies have taken on a more restrictionist flavor in recent years, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Today, prospective immigrants, and even refugees seeking a safe haven, face considerable challenges, restrictions, and delays in their quest for lawful entry into the United States.

U.S. Immigration: Today's Reality, Challenges, and Paradoxes

There is a growing consensus that the current U.S. immigration system is fundamentally flawed and is in need of reform. There are an estimated 8 to 12 million persons in the country without

proper authorization (undocumented); the reunification of families through legal means entails waits of 5, 10, 15, and even 20 years; some 450,000 jobs requiring unskilled laborers are filled each year by immigrants (mostly undocumented), yet there are only 10,000 temporary worker visas available for this type of employment; and there are on average 300 to 400 migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border due to U.S. border enforcement strategies that force desperate migrants to attempt clandestine crossings in remote, inhospitable desert regions. Additionally, asylum seekers to the U.S. face imprisonment, unrealistic requirements to substantiate their claimed persecution, and even return, in some cases, to the very persecutors they fled.

Though the consensus is that the *status quo* is unacceptable, there is a divergence of opinion on how best to resolve these problems. One school of thought, promoted primarily by restrictionists, holds that the U.S. should further strengthen its enforcement regime. In so doing, this argument goes, through tighter border enforcement, the U.S. can prevent the 300,000 unauthorized arrivals each year and through better internal controls over temporary visa holders, the U.S. can prevent visa over-stayers, which together account for a growing population of undocumented.

The other school of thought, one in which the Catholic Church in the U.S. is a leading voice, calls for comprehensive reforms that take into account the reasons for migration and the adaptation of laws to more effectively manage for those realities. The comprehensive reforms espoused by the Church include (1) developmental initiatives that improve the conditions in developing countries so that people are not compelled out of necessity to migrate, (2) provisions for an earned legalization program for the undocumented already in the country, (3) elimination of the backlogs inherent in family reunification visas, (4) creation of a temporary workers visa program that better conforms with economic realities, while protecting both U.S. and migrant laborers, and (5) restoration of due process and other protections for immigrants, especially asylum seekers.

Legislative proposals representing these two schools of thought have recently been introduced in the U.S. Congress, so the debate has been enjoined.

U.S.-Mexico Bishops' Collaboration on Migration

After a period of study and discernment, in 2003, on the 4th anniversary of *Ecclesia in America*, the bishops of Mexico and the United States issued a pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. This pastoral letter summarizes Scriptural and social teachings that underpin the Church's attitudes toward migration and calls for a number of pastoral and public policy responses to the migration phenomenon. Looking within the Church, the pastoral letter attempts to answer the question, "How do we as Church provide for the pastoral needs of migrants?" Looking at our respective nations' policies, "What changes are required to respond to the migrants' needs in a manner that protects their rights and treats them with dignity?"

The Mexican and U.S. bishops have continued to collaborate in efforts to promote the vision contained in this pastoral letter and have undertaken a number of concrete steps to develop pastoral responses and influence public policies.

The Church's Efforts to Promote Immigration Reforms

In May, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops launched a major campaign to bring about comprehensive reforms to the U.S. immigration system. In announcing the *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope* Campaign, the U.S. bishops indicated their intention to conduct educational efforts designed to influence attitudes, especially those of Catholics, and to bring about legislative changes through grassroots advocacy efforts.

The bishops have called for the establishment of *Justice for Immigrants* campaigns in each diocese of the country, through which efforts to engage and mobilize the parishes will be pursued.

Dioceses and parishes are also encouraged to promote positive attitudes toward immigrants and needed reforms through the media. At the national level, the bishops are actively engaging the U.S. legislative and executive branches of government to shape an acceptable legislative proposal and a winning legislative strategy.

U.S. Refugee Policy

The United States has a long history of support for international refugee relief efforts and acceptance of refugees for resettlement. U.S. contributions to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for instance, represents a third of that agency's budget. Additionally, the U.S. provides financial support for the International Red Cross, Intergovernmental Organization for Migration, and other international organizations involved in responding to the plight of refugees.

Traditionally, the U.S. has also had a generous resettlement program for refugees in need of protection and durable solutions. Between 1975 and 2000, the U.S. accepted more than two million refugees for resettlement, of which nearly 900,000 were assisted in their resettlement by the Church. Though the number of refugees admitted for resettlement has decreased since the 9/11 attacks, the 50,000 refugees to be admitted this year represent the largest resettlement effort of any country and, perhaps, even larger than all other countries combined.

At the same time, U.S. asylum policies have become quite restrictive. Current U.S. policies are designed to interdict asylum seekers before arrival and if an asylum seeker does arrive, he or she is detained as their claim of persecution is being adjudicated.

With a growing proportion of the world's refugees remaining without a durable solution for longer periods of time, the international community must do more. Support for protection efforts, as well as for the aggressive pursuit of durable solutions, must be increased. The Church's voice with governments and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees needs to be strengthened.

Recommendations/Suggestions for COMECE-USCCB Collaboration

Because of the international dimensions of migration and because there is increasing international cooperation among nations to "control" migration and cooperate in enforcement efforts, it is important for the Church to approach her advocacy in a coordinated way across borders. The following suggestions emanate from this principle of collaboration.

1. COMECE and the USCCB should develop mechanisms for information sharing on migration-related matters, including public policy analyses/updates and information about related Church activities and social and ecclesial integration.
2. COMECE and the USCCB, along with the Vatican and other Conferences, should consider ways to strengthen interventions designed to influence international bodies and efforts to manage migration and respond to refugees.
3. COMECE and the USCCB should work closely with the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Caritas International and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) to promote public policies and responses to the migration phenomenon that reflect Christian values.
4. COMECE and the USCCB should work to establish Episcopal liaisons between Bishops' Conferences, as needed, to assist European migrants to the U.S., such as exist for immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Poland.

Bibliography

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