

All Come Bearing Gifts

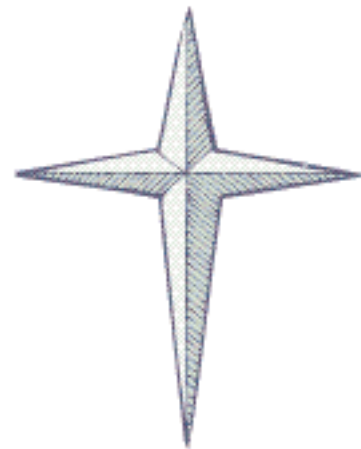
By Marcia Timmel

A National Migration Week Bulletin Insert

Into this world, this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at
Christ has come uninvited.

But because he cannot be at home in it,
His place is with the others for whom there is no
His place is with those who do not belong...
who are tortured, bombed and exterminated
With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.

Thomas Merton



In the beautiful Mexican tradition of Las Posadas, each evening from December 16th until Christmas Eve, children dressed as Mary and Joseph process to three houses, asking for a place to stay. The first two houses turn them away, while the third home offers them a stable for shelter. Once the children accept, the third house hosts a party which includes prayer, singing, warm food and drink, and perhaps a piñata. It is a joyful celebration, but it often fails to remind us of the very real anxiety and fear the young migrant couple from Nazareth must have felt, as they sought a safe shelter for the baby Jesus to be born in.

Certainly, if the innkeepers of Bethlehem had realized that the long-awaited Messiah was seeking lodging, they would have found room. Only a few, however, were able to recognize the Promised One amid the upheaval and confusion of the Roman occupation and tax census. Some, like Herod, when they heard of his arrival, saw only threat, and sought to destroy him. To save their child, the Holy Family was forced to flee, becoming refugees in the land of Egypt.

What if God were to send Jesus back to our troubled world today? Would we be any better prepared to receive him than the

innkeepers of Bethlehem?

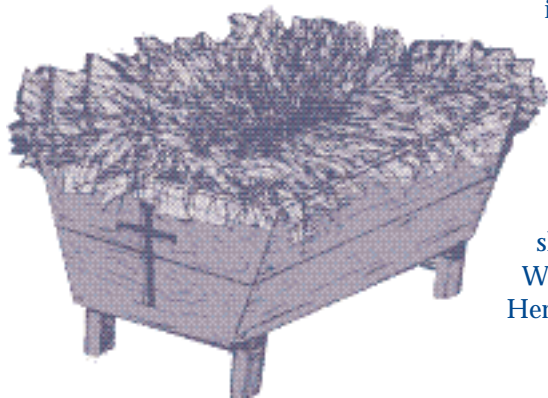
Could we recognize him in the person of the immigrant or refugee seeking shelter in our land? Would we, like Herod, be so stricken

with fear that we would reject him in the name of security? Is our country so broken after the terror which shattered our lives on 9/11 that we can no longer risk making room for those fleeing war, torture, famine, disease, and despair? Or can we find the grace to make room in our land and our lives?

The World As a Demented Inn

Throughout the last century, the U.S. seemed impervious to the wars, violence, and terrorism that devastated much of Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. We had the illusion of invincibility. The conflagration that destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon also consumed our sense of security. The world suddenly seems a very frightening place, and our land quite vulnerable. "Homeland Security" is now a byword, and our instinct is to try to seal our borders and shut out the rest of the world. The comfortable world we once knew has indeed become the "demented inn" of Thomas Merton's vision.

For millions of people in the rest of the world, however, our newly-experienced horror is a daily reality. In 2001 alone, there were almost 15 million refugees and asylum seekers fleeing from oppression in more than 50 different countries. They have fled wars, genocide, torture, and rape, often after losing everything: family, friends, home, and career. They languish without hope in refugee camps, often suffering from exposure, disease, and starvation. Millions of others are economic migrants, forced to leave their homelands and loved ones in order to find work. The common bond between these migrants and refugees is that they all seek protection of their basic human dignity and rights.



In the midst of this world turned upside down, where can the United States find true security? Ironically, if we seek the peace of Christ, we can find it only by opening our hearts and our borders to those in need.

Seeking a Balance

Catholic social teaching identifies three principles which relate to immigration. First, all people have a God-given right to the necessary conditions – economic, social, political and religious – to live safely in their own land of origin. Second, in the absence of those conditions and rights, people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. Third, a country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration – as long as it is done with mercy and justice. These principles are rooted in scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The Church insists that we respond to the Biblical commands to welcome the stranger in our midst, remembering that we, too, were once aliens. We are commanded to welcome strangers as we would welcome Jesus himself. Yet even in the best of times, many in our land feared that newcomers may take more than their share of resources and have called for sharply restrictive state and federal legislation. Now more than ever, there are calls for restricting admissions. In 2002, the U.S. government had approved refugee admissions of 70,000 – but in fact less than half that number were allowed in. Sadly, this meant separating families, leaving refugee children stranded, and allowing people without food or shelter to continue suffering. The question is: How do we balance “homeland security” with real issues of justice and mercy?

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First, we must always remember that we, too, are strangers in this land of immigrants. From the early Asians who crossed the narrow Alaskan straits thousands of years ago to become the first “native” Americans, to the European explorers who “discovered” this New World hundreds of years ago; to the Africans who were brought here as slaves, to the myriad immigrants of all nationalities: We, or our ancestors, all came to this land as migrants. No race or individual has pre-emptive rights in the United States.

Second, we must not hide behind a wall of isolationism, cutting ourselves off from the need and suffering of the rest of the human race. The first and best solution to refugee crises is the prevention of the conditions that force people to flee. We must always work to protect the same rights and privileges we cherish throughout the world.

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Third, we must form our immigration policy generously, for as we have been given much, so we will be called to account for much. When we have found Jesus hungry, homeless, and a stranger, how did we welcome him? We are also called to recognize the contributions that newcomers historically and continually make to our faith, culture and economy. We should remember that “all come bearing gifts,” and our country is enriched by the talents and grace newcomers bring.

Finally, we need to protect our borders fairly. We should remain open to our sisters and brothers who, like us, seek survival for themselves and their families. We must refuse to succumb to anti-immigrant hysteria, and should strive to screen out only those individuals who seek to do us harm. Refugees and immigrants have long gone through extensive background and security checks as a condition for their admission. They pose little threat, especially compared to the more than 30 million who enter our country annually in non-immigrant categories. It was no surprise to those who work with migrants that none of the terrorists involved in the September attacks had entered the country through refugee resettlement or immigration channels. Neither were we surprised by the outpouring of patriotism and support from immigrant communities in the aftermath of 9/ 11. One of the greatest gifts that newcomers bring to our land is their deep appreciation of the liberty that those of us born here all too often take for granted.

For generations, the Statue of Liberty has shone her light like a modern day star of Bethlehem: a beacon for those, who like the Holy Family, must search for a safe haven. Once they arrive we must find the courage and love to open our hearts and our borders, lest once again Christ be told that there is “no room” in our inn.

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