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## Standing at the Crossroads

Why we need comprehensive, humane immigration reform—now.

By Allison Johnson



**THE UNITED STATES** is a nation fueled by immigrant ingenuity and labor, yet our nation's citizenship laws have fluctuated from open and generous to restrictive and ethnocentric. After two failed attempts at reform in the last decade, our nation has been living with the consequences of a broken immigration system.

There are currently 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of our society, in fear of deportation and separation from their families. On the one hand we have increased border militarization, but on the other the government has routinely ignored the entry and existence of unauthorized workers in order to benefit from cheap labor. As many immigration activists say, it is as if we have a sign at the border saying "Keep Out" and a sign in the workplace crying "Help Wanted."

For workers without proper documentation, there is virtually no way for them to legalize, although many of them long for the opportunity and privilege of citizenship. Large-scale workplace immigration raids, increased hate crimes against Latinos, and indefinite family separation are all results of a lack of real reform, making the fundamental question surrounding the immigration debate not *if* we should fix the system, but rather *how* we should go about it.

The faith community has consistently advocated for immigration laws to better reflect the heart of God, which calls us to love and care for the stranger in our midst (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). For example, a resolution passed by the National Association of Evangelicals in support of immigration reform says, "policies must be evaluated to reflect that immigrants are made in the image of God and demonstrate biblical grace to the foreigner." In February 2009,

more than 167 interfaith prayer vigils were held across the U.S., petitioning for the protection and humane treatment of immigrant families. Latino evangelical churches, joined by members of Congress, have held rallies, attended by thousands of people, that highlight the plight of "mixed status" families (comprised of both legal and undocumented residents) fighting to stay together in the face of deportation.

Through Sojourners' Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform campaign, we have been one of the leading voices in shifting this debate away from hateful rhetoric and pointing to areas of consensus where Christians can unite. We seek immigration reform that upholds the family as the core unit of society by placing families at the top of the political agenda. We insist on a pathway to citizenship for the 12 million immigrants who are already here, with reasonable requirements for legalization. Finally, we believe any legislation's enforcement requirements must be enacted with respect to the dignity of the human person.

Immigration has always shaped our nation and our communities. As we move forward into a period of legislative debate, let us remember that we are, first and foremost, talking about people whose lives will be profoundly impacted by changes to our immigration system. Let our conversations about this challenging issue be guided by love and respect. And, as Christians, let's remember that our citizenship and primary identification is of the kingdom of heaven. ■

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## Seekers of Refuge

### The Christian imperative for immigration reform.

By Angela Maria Kelley and Sally Steenland

**DISTRESSED IMMIGRANTS AND** their families sought refuge at St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville, Iowa, in 2008, after hundreds of immigrant workers at a meat processing plant were rounded up and held at an exhibit hall for cattle. A year earlier in New Bedford, Mass., the basement of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church echoed with cries from the frightened wives and children of hundreds of immigrants who were arrested by agents at a military vest factory. After spending hours at the church counseling them, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts wrote: "These workers may lack documents, but they do not lack dignity, and they do not lack friends."

Indeed, for all of us, the church or temple is a sanctuary where people seek refuge, practice charity, and find the courage to forgive. The kinship of family and the dignity of all humans are cherished.

Now, more than at any other time in our recent history, the faith community is playing a vital role in a national policy debate that will test how deeply each of us holds these principled values. Leaders of diverse faiths have called upon Congress to reform the nation's outdated immigration laws which currently break up families and neighborhoods and treat workers unfairly. Their involvement is crucial because faith leaders have the moral authority to urge that the often caustic immigration issue be handled with civility and respect for fellow human beings.

"These leaders understand that because immigrants are, first and foremost, human beings made in God's image—many of whom came here to feed their families—it is critical that civility guides our rhetoric whenever we discuss immigration," said Sen. Charles Schumer, chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and Border Security.

Upholding human civility in the immigration debate will not be easy. The broken immigration system has allowed fear and hostility to be stirred up against immigrants. Further,

the temptation to scapegoat immigrants seems to have worsened during this economic crisis, as immigration restrictionists have wrongly blamed employed non-citizens for native U.S. workers getting laid off.

Bringing the undocumented immigrants out from the underground economy will spur growth through increased tax receipts from workers and unscrupulous employers. Proposed immigration law changes would also bring about enforcement policies that include safeguards to protect the human dignity of those arrested. They would improve legal immigration channels for employment and for families seeking to be reunited.

"America's social problems—unemployment, poverty, crime, substance abuse, family breakup—were not caused by immigrants," said Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, at a Senate subcommittee hearing last October. "The solution is not to exclude immigrants, but to intelligently integrate them." Anderson added this reminder: "They are us."

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the nation is whether we can find within us the courage to forgive immigrants who came into the country illegally, or those who stayed after their visa expired, but who are now willing to undergo vigorous eligibility requirements, such as payment of back taxes, to earn legal status.

From biblical times to the present, religious communities—regardless of denomination—have embraced the presence of immigrants. By calling for comprehensive immigration reform, faith leaders are presenting the church and the nation with an opportunity to speak out against a broken system that is morally wrong. ■

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## Of Bread and Salt

**When those who feel accursed come to our door, are we ready with something holy?** *By Noemi Mena*

**HOW DO WE**, as people of God, respond to the complex issues surrounding immigration? I am reminded of those wonderful passages in the Hebrew Bible, those verses where God reminds God's people to be hospitable to foreigners.

God puts it simply: "You all have been there and done that. You all know how hard it is to be away from home. You know the challenges of being a foreigner in a strange land. So you ought to know better. Be good and help out the foreign people in your midst."

But for the sake of keeping it real, instead of those nice scriptures, I want to look at this one, Mark 7:24-30:

*And from thence he arose, and went away into the borders of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered into a house, and would have no man know it; but he could not be hid. Straight away a woman, whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, having heard of him, came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by race. And she besought him that he would cast forth the demon out of her daughter. And he said unto her, "Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs." But she answered and said unto him, "Yea, Lord; even the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." And he said unto her, "For this saying go thy way; the demon is gone out of thy daughter." And she went away unto her house, and found the child laid upon the bed, and the demon gone out.*

I thought this was a good scripture because it highlights the layers of issues that surface in dealing with immigration. Here is this woman trying to get services she is not entitled to receive. She probably hasn't been to the doctor for ages, but since it's for her daughter, we see her begging. And we see Jesus responding to her as "other."

While this sense of "you and I are not the same" is captured in his words—"it is not right

to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs"—it also reminds us of the economic issues related to immigration. There is this sense that immigrants come to take the little that we have.

And lastly we see the woman insisting on her demands. While she does it with painful humility, she is as outrageous as those immigrants that make demands at public demonstrations.

I MYSELF HAD a visit from a Syrophenician woman the other day. She too arrived inopportunistically as I tried to get organized for the day. I was in my office on the third floor of our church when I got a call from the reception desk: "Can you come down? There's a Hispanic woman here who says she needs to speak to a pastor now!"

Perhaps it was the imprints of years of anguish on her brown face that made me quickly decide to take her to the chapel instead of my office. As soon as I brought down the two altar chairs and we sat facing each other, she poured out a torrent of stories.

I quickly learned she was an indigenous woman from a Latin American country. She spoke her indigenous language, Spanish, and some broken English. She explained that recently, while she was pregnant with her last child, she had crossed the border going south to get her teenage daughter, who continually pleaded to come to the United States.

So she planned a quick trip, since she had to return to her work and family responsibilities in the U.S. She crossed to the other side and, after just a few days of rest, this pregnant woman and her teenage daughter crossed the desert back into the United States.

Then she finally told me why she had come to see me. She came to see me because she was struggling with a curse.

She knew this because people kept placing strange objects in her home's entryway. She said



## THE CHRISTIAN CALL FOR COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

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she was tired of cleaning her porch with boiling water and salt—but the curse did not leave. And she went on to say that the curses were not only on her front steps, but in her dreams. She was having dreams of snakes crawling into her womb. Then she finally told me more precisely why she had come.

She came to get something holy—something she could take to her daughter, the one she had gone to get across the border. The young girl had a hard time adapting to the United States, and when her father beat her, someone reported it to the authorities and the girl was taken into foster care. Now, the young girl had become pregnant while in foster care.

The woman was hoping with all her heart that her daughter was not really pregnant, that it was just a snake, like the snake in her dreams. A snake that she might be able to get out of her daughter if I gave her something holy that she could take to her.

Overwhelmed with what I heard, I tapped into her story of pouring hot, salty water on her porch. I told her that Jesus came to make us salt of the earth. And that he made us salty enough to make the devil himself flee. And regarding the intrusive snake, it occurred to me to tell her that God had cursed the snake way back in the Garden of Eden. Then I looked around to see if I could find something holy.

I saw a palm branch left over from Palm Sunday, and I anointed it with a little oil. I thought that the Jesus who was received with waving palm leaves and then crucified would certainly feel the pain of this woman who journeyed through the desert in search of hope.

I told her that her daughter would be given a medical test and that it would probably show that it was not a snake, but a precious baby inside her. And we prayed together; I in Spanish and she in her native tongue, praising God.

I sang to her, “Ni lo alto ni lo profundo ni ninguna cosa creada . . . Me podrán apartar del amor del Señor que es en Cristo Jesús Señor nuestro.” It’s a song based on the Romans passage that says that “nothing, neither heights nor depths, nor anything created”—not even snakes, I added—“could separate us from the love of God.”

I gave her the anointed palm leaf. She thanked me, and left.

As she left, I thought she was right about

feeling cursed. She was cursed by colonization and the genocide of her people. She was cursed by oppressive neocolonization, by revolutions gone bad. Cursed by civil wars, by global capitalism. Cursed by anti-immigrant sentiment.

I JUST WANT TO confess that, like this woman, sometimes I feel I am being cursed. I know it because people keep leaving things on the steps of my church: beer bottles and condoms and human waste that we keep hosing off the surroundings of the church.

What we cannot hose down is the parade of wasted human beings, the tired people and sick people who are looking for some very basic things: food, shelter, work, transportation, money for a prescription, something for bed fleas, something for lice.

Some come from far away to let someone know that their phones, TVs, and minds are being tapped by the government and they want it to stop. Some come to get an antidote for a curse.

Don’t get me wrong: I meet with other pastors and folk from nonprofits; I participate in vigils, sign letters, and go to rallies. I allow college graduates working for the unions to organize me.

But the curse continues. I guess I need a stronger salt, stronger light.

We know that Jesus grew into his calling. Little by little he understood that his was a ministry without boundaries. We see him changed when he engages the Samaritan woman—a woman in a sense cursed by invasions that had made her culturally and religiously diverse. We see Jesus’ transformation when he lifts up the Good Samaritan as the one who understood who his neighbor was.

In Matthew 25, Jesus gets a little radical by putting it on us to break the curse. He reminds us that God is with the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and the strangers.

I know deep inside that all the needs we see are opportunities for God’s power and grace to be manifested. We really need to do all we can to help our neighbors to break the multilayered curses they are facing.

As the church of Christ, we need to be ready for those coming to us searching for something holy. ■

*Noemi Mena is pastor of Hispanic ministries at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C. This is adapted from a sermon she gave at a Sojourners chapel service.*

## Building a Civilization of Love

### Catholic social teaching and immigration reform.

By Daniel G. Groody

**AT THE HEART** of the Catholic Church's social teaching is a vision of God who migrated to the human race to save a people alienated from God. In response to the God who first loved us, it sees itself as a pilgrim people and the body of Christ who journey through this world as spiritual migrants. As it moves toward a promised homeland, it seeks to walk in solidarity with all those who are vulnerable in their earthly sojourn, working together for the unity of the human family and a more just and peaceful world.

Today the church finds itself not only at geographical borders, but at the borders between civil law and natural law, human rights and sovereign rights, national security and human insecurity, and citizenship and discipleship. In the faces of more than 200 million people on the move globally today, however, it sees a mirror of itself and the image of Christ, urging it to advocate for three important dimensions of immigration reform: 1) the dignity of the human person; 2) the international common good; and 3) a globalization of solidarity.

Despite the physical difficulties of their journey, many migrants say that the hardest parts are the indignities they experience when people treat them as dogs, as if they were the lowest form of life on earth. Often their worst fear is that they are no one to anyone.

Catholic social teaching shows us that immigration reform must begin with an understanding of what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. In contrast to a world that often typecasts immigrants as aliens and invaders, if not terrorists or criminals, Catholic social teaching seeks to look first at the human face of the migrant. It is the cornerstone of a just and humane society to see that they are not merely workers but people (Genesis 1:26), not simply strangers but members of God's household, not just foreigners

but children of God (Ephesians 2:19).

Catholic social teaching acknowledges that a state has a right and even a duty to protect its borders, but it does not see this as an unrestricted or absolute right. People also have a right to migrate, especially when conditions in their homeland make it impossible to live dignified lives. Thus, Catholic social teaching challenges nationalistic, legalistic, or materialistic idolatries that exclude others without any social, moral, or divine reference point, or any regard for the exigencies of distributive, contributive, and restorative justice.

The Catholic bishops of the United States believe that "any limitation on international migration must be undertaken only after careful consideration of the demands of international solidarity. These considerations include development, trade and investment programs, education and training, and even distribution policies designed to narrow the wide gaps between the rich and the poor." As such, migration must not be viewed as a problem in itself but a symptom of deeper global imbalances that need attention.

"Migration," as Pope Benedict XVI notes, "is an opportunity to emphasize the unity of the human family and the values of acceptance, hospitality, and love of neighbor." He adds, "in an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it [involve] the whole human family... [and] the community of peoples and nations." In proclaiming the kingdom of God, we seek to promote the dignity of all people in order to achieve a globalization of solidarity that builds, in the end, a civilization of love. ■

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