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 labor market worldwide, a consequence among other things of the enormous drive of globalization.

—Pope Benedict XVI

According to statistics from the International Organization for Migration (IMO), there are currently 191 million migrants worldwide, people who live outside their country of birth. Added to this, there are 23.7 million internally displaced persons and more than 20 million refugees, people who were forced to leave their countries of origin and have nowhere to go. As a result of impoverishment in many parts of the world, which is widely attributed to globalization, as Bishop Álvaro Ramazzini articulates very clearly in his article in this issue, millions of desperate people are daily risking their lives to find a place of safety where they can work and live with some dignity. About one in six of the people who try to travel from North Africa to the Spanish Islands dies in the attempt, according to news reports. In 2006, more than 6,000 people died trying to cross that sea. Despite the tightened security of the European Union, in 2006 six times more people arrived in the Canary Islands than in 2005. In the United States, according to reports from No More Deaths (nomoredeaths.org), a coalition of humanitarian and faith based organizations, more than 2,000 men, women, and children have died trying to cross the Mexican border into the United States since 1998. Over the past few years, the United States has deployed its military, built fences, and is in the process of building a wall along parts of the Mexico-U.S. border to prevent people from crossing. Mexico has also tightened its control of its southern border to prevent Central American people from entering. Morocco did the same to keep West Africans from reaching Europe. Yet, the numbers of people who try to cross these and many other borders, fences, and walls are on the rise every day, despite the fact that such trips have become more difficult, more risky, and more expensive. These are only a few examples that point to the big divide existing between the worlds of the “haves” and the “have-nots” generated by the current world economic system.

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Theological Reflection

Our religious traditions are replete with migration and exile stories. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn that the people of God and many of their patriarchs and prophets were migrants and refugees, forced to exile. Ironically, it is in these foreign lands that some of their profound universal religious experiences and visions were articulated.

The Exodus story of liberation unfolded in the land of Egypt, and a new vision of faith in one God and a better world for all emerged during the Babylonian exile. The gospels tell us that Jesus and his family also had to migrate to the land of Egypt out of fear for their lives. Migration and exile narratives from the Scriptures have become very popular for theological reflection in our time as a result of the presence of many immigrants and refugees in our churches who are searching for religious meaning in their new countries.

Migration is, and has always been, a painful human experience. Contextual theological reflection on the experience of migration is important for finding God in the journey and in the new land. The experience of many immigrants resonates with the psalmist’s prayer: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:4). Theologian Vivian Ligo tells us that reclaiming faith and the sense of the holy in a new culture is not easy. “Immigrants’ experiences of God in their native culture,” she writes, “become inaccessible to them in the new one” (Ligo, 40).

Modern Catholic social teaching strongly affirms hospitality to immigrants, advocacy for their rights, and respect of their human dignity. All human beings, the social magisterium of the church teaches us, are primarily members of the one human family. This identity of belonging to the human family is deeper than belonging to a particular state or people. The 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* by Pope John XXIII, endorsing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states clearly in paragraph 25:

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own State. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of [human-kind].

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church strongly endorsed the international agreements on the protection of the rights of migrants, migrant workers and their families, and refugees. Advocating for these rights is considered by the church to be a pastoral responsibility. The annual World Day of Migrants and Refugees messages from the Vatican are constant reminders to churches across the world of their obligation to welcome migrants and advocate for their human rights. In addition to these annual messages, the recent Vatican instruction, *The Love of Christ towards Migrants*, calls for global solidarity with the precarious situation of migrants and foreigners in the present climate of fear, intolerance, xenophobia, and racism (no. 6). The document raises a number of ethical questions about the root cause of migration and calls for “a new international economic order for a more equitable distribution of the goods of the earth. This would make a real contribution to reducing and checking the flow of a large number of migrants from populations in difficulty” (no. 8).

In many countries around the world, including the United States, the need to reform unjust migration laws has become a central
concern in national debates. Christian churches and many other faith communities strongly support justice for immigrants campaigns. The U.S. Catholic bishops, in their statement *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us*, link the issue of hospitality to immigrants and the defense of their rights to the call for a new evangelization, which is well articulated in the post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in America*. The new evangelization, affirm the bishops, is primarily an encounter with Jesus Christ that leads to conversion, communion, and solidarity. In the present context of the United States, this encounter, explain the bishops, includes encountering the immigrants. The call for a profound conversion is a call to “reject the anti-immigrant stance that has become popular in different parts of our country, and the nativism, ethnocentricty, and racism that continue to reassert themselves in our communities.” Communion is a call to all members of the church “to prepare themselves to receive the newcomers with a genuine spirit of welcome,” and solidarity is to listen and respond to the “suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere” (*Welcoming the Stranger*, 2–4).

The more recent joint pastoral letter by the Catholic bishops conferences of Mexico and the United States and the subsequent campaigns for immigrants’ rights are significant signs of hope for our times. In paragraph 35 of *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of Mexico and the United States affirm the right to migration and the rights of immigrants:

> The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

The bishops recognize in the new immigrant advocacy movements important signs of the times and signs of hope. Some of these signs are the growing awareness of immigrants and the significant contribution of their cultures and faith, the new social conscience they bring, and their gift of community and hospitality (no. 8).

In the context of the United States, another important sign of the times, I believe, is the strong and effective involvement of the churches in supporting these movements. *The Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform* is one excellent example. Many observers note that without a serious, consistent Catholic involvement, it is unlikely that a comprehensive and just reform can be achieved. The commitment of the church to give voice to the concerns of the marginalized people and support their movements of hope is not only important for transforming unjust social structures, which is an imperative of the Gospel and a mandate of Catholic social teaching, but is also important for the renewal of the church. Openness to reading the signs of the times and dialogue with the work of the Spirit in the world were main features of the movements that sparked the renewal of the church around the time of Vatican II and continue to be essential for the renewal of the church today.
References


International Organization for Migration. “Migration Facts and Figures.”


