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The Border and Immigration: An Invitation to *Posada*

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

On December 15, 1997, just an hour after the Southwest airlines jet landed in El Paso, Texas, I was crossing the border with the *Misioneras de María Dolorosa* into Juarez, Chihuahua, to study Spanish and learn more about the culture and reality of Mexico. Juarez, which lies at a juncture point with El Paso, Texas, and Sunland Park, New Mexico, is a city of 1.3 million inhabitants—65 percent of them younger than 30 years of age. It is growing by 75 families a day, or about 100,000 new inhabitants each year. Where do they come from? Why do they come? The poor rural areas in the interior of Mexico cannot sustain their population. Subsistence farming is impossible. So they migrate north to the border to work in the *maquiladoras*, or on the farms of the southwest United States. They come in hope, leaving their familiar world behind; they experience alienation and social deterioration as they struggle to gain the resources necessary to live.

Colonias in Juarez, Mexico

Colonias in Juarez are defined as different geographic areas of the city, similar to our neighborhoods. The central and eastern zones accommodate the *maquiladora* plants, i.e., U.S. factories and assembly plants on the border which hire Mexican workers at lower wages than would ordinarily be permitted under minimum wage laws. *Colonias* are mainly residential, with street after street of small housing units made of either cinder block or just slats or crates of wood; they spread west and south. Some houses are windowless with hard dirt floors, although some have a poured cement base and use various materials for a roof. With no insulation, huge drafts of cold winter air pour through cracks around windows and doors, while in the summer it is stifling hot. Water trucks come out once a week to fill various containers with the week's supply. There is no sewage infrastructure, and electrical lines—if there is electricity—often lie on the surface of the streets. Because public transportation is so poor, women must leave for work at 6 A.M. and return home about 8 P.M. Some *maquiladoras* have their own "personal transport" buses. During the heavy rains, these buses are the only means of transportation as the mud roads become impassable. Why does the city not put more resources into the development of

public services for these mushrooming *colonias*? It is a well-known reality that their first priority is to build the infrastructures of the industrial parks of the *maquiladoras*.

Juarez Maquiladoras

In the 1960s U.S. assembly plants began to spring up in various third-world countries to reduce the cost of production by employing cheap labor. In 1965 Mexico created the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) to address extremely high unemployment rates due to the internal migration flow of the poor to border areas, and to spur the industrialization of Northern Mexico. BIP encouraged U.S. corporations to build plants in Mexico along the border from Texas to California. There are 320 *maquiladoras* in Juarez alone which assemble only the most labor-intensive components of commercial products. They employ about 40 percent of the working population at low wages. One man spoke of working nine hours a day for eight dollars a day. Most jobs, however, go to young women at about five dollars a day, or children from ages as young as ten who are paid even less. Factories relocate to Mexico because the profit margin expands exponentially with low-cost labor.

Social Consequences for Labor

The cost to the workers, however, is high. Working conditions are not monitored as in the United States and safety procedures are not required. Sexual harassment is commonplace. There are cases in court against those U.S. corporations where women are continually denigrated. Child labor laws are very weak and children have died because of machine "accidents." Intimidation of workers, and lack of unions to speak on their behalf, keep workers subdued and management in power. A union organizer for the Juarez *maquiladoras* that I had an opportunity to speak with believes union organizers in the United States and Mexico must partner and share their resources so that justice can be done on both sides of the border. In a global economy with multinational corporations moving to third-world countries to obtain cheap labor, putting laborers out of work in the United States, an organized global labor movement seems to be a need for workers in both poor and rich nations.

Social Consequences for Families and Community

Food and other basic items are not cheap in Juarez. Low salaries cannot supply a family with sufficient nutrition, resulting in health problems. There is no money for medicine or doctors. Decent housing is out of the question. With insufficient child care available, mothers leave their children home alone. To respond to this need the *Misioneras de*

María Dolorosa operate a home for children during the week, but more such homes are needed. With most of the family having to work, education stops after elementary school. Secondary education is a luxury. The grinding poverty breeds crime, depression, and a search for escape from these harsh realities. Drugs provide a dulling of the senses, and gangs provide a way to feel comradeship in a city where alienation runs deep. There are over four hundred gangs, one-half of them armed, in the different zones in Juarez. This results in over four hundred robberies a month, with extortion and other forms of violence common. Graffiti abounds on almost every building, including the walls around the "more affluent" *colonias*. Homelessness, street children, prostitution, AIDS, and alcoholism are growing at an alarming rate. Besides outreach from parishes, the diocese has encouraged religious and lay groups to operate hospitality houses for the poor, the homeless, and refugees.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

The internal migrants of Mexico come to the border because they see it as a sign of hope. There is work, but the reality is that hope is not fulfilled. So weary people press farther north. Hope now lies across the border. But on the other side of the Rio Grande, one only finds more *maquiladoras*, *colonias*, hospitality houses.

Colonias and Maquiladoras in the United States

Texas has fourteen hundred *colonias* and New Mexico has another fifty-five. HUD defines a *colonia* as a community within 150 miles of the Mexican border that lacks potable water, adequate sewage systems, accessible electricity, paved roads, or decent, safe housing. Families crowded in small apartments in the city are enticed by developers to buy a piece of desert for no money down and monthly payments of \$100 to \$150. There is no relief from the hot desert sun in the summer. Most houses are scavenged wood pallets from grocery stores, scraps of plywood and tar paper from dumpsites, and old cinder blocks. Fences are made from used tires. It took years for a *colonia*, lying adjacent to the well-serviced city of Horizon City, Texas, to receive city water and sewer, and then only after a massive organizing effort by the residents.

Organizing is going on in another way, for example, among the *maquiladora* workers in Texas. In 1995, *La Mujer Obrera* (Woman Worker) was engaged in organizing the employees in the Alcoa plant scheduled to begin laying off workers. The layoffs were in preparation for closing the plant in El Paso and opening another across the border in Juarez. Organizing this plant was important because Alcoa provided above minimum wage jobs and benefits to the more than seven hundred mainly Hispanic factory workers. The layoffs were certified by

the Federal Department of Labor as being related to NAFTA. Since 1995, fifty-two plants have announced their intention to downsize or close, amounting to a loss of ten thousand jobs. One year more than three thousand garment workers lost their jobs.

The Wall

During an April 1996 immersion experience in El Paso I visited a wall then under construction. Tall steel beams had been inserted deep into the desert sands with a mesh submerged below the surface to deter digging under the fence. On Pentecost of 1996, about four hundred Catholics from both sides of the wall met to celebrate a Mass with the theme "*Iglesia sin fronteras*"—Church without borders. Gathered around the altar on the border, it was no longer clear who was from Mexico and who was from the United States. Participants smiled, joined hands, and cried.

Today the tall wall of chain link metal stretching for miles into the desert separating the United States from Mexico is complete. Strong lights on the U.S. side illuminate the night. There are other twelve-foot-high walls made of metal, stretching along the two-thousand-mile Mexican–U.S. border, for example, at Tijuana, California, Nogales, Arizona, and Douglas, Arizona. All the walls have one purpose: to keep undocumented migrants out of the United States. This last year scores of people died trying to get around the wall by crossing through deserts, canyons, and mountains, while twenty-three persons drowned trying to cross the All American Canal in California.

What's in a Name?

Names are used to describe reality. There are a lot of names that are used to describe the people who migrate across our borders, names that hurt and humiliate, names that blame and tear down one's integrity and personhood. A name describing undocumented immigrants is "illegal alien," implying that they are unwanted and undesirable. Yet as the Jewish writer Elie Wiesel says, "No human being is illegal," for we all inhabit the same planet and share the same human reality.

At one time the southwestern United States was part of Mexico. There was no border. Families came and went on both sides of the Rio Grande for settlement, for business, for visiting. There was nothing illegal, nothing alien, about a practice that had been going on for centuries. The border patrol's quote of numbers of people crossing the border illegally include many people who cross to shop, visit relatives, or earn money and return home. Actually, 85 percent of all immigrants are documented, and of the 15 percent who are undocumented, half arrived legally—as students, temporary workers, tourists, visitors—but overstayed their visas.

In history books, European immigrants are described as “pioneers,” “settlers,” “newcomers.” Why are these words not used today to describe those who come across our borders, whether boundaries of oceans or land, wanting to stay either temporarily or permanently? The United States uses the name “border” to describe that imaginary line of demarcation. In Spanish the word is “*frontera*” (frontier). Frontier has a different connotation than border; a border is static but a frontier pushes the limits of possibility. Our early western explorers were called “frontiersmen.” They pushed at the limits of possibility. If we called our brothers and sisters coming from south of the Rio Grande “frontier people” would we think of them more positively?

The women and men who come to our nation do not see themselves as “illegal aliens.” They are individuals with hopes and dreams like those countless others who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in previous eras.

“My dream is to learn to speak and write English very well and, maybe in a little time, I will be able to work and develop in my profession. This is my dream: to give a better future for my children and my family” (Maria Guadalupe Montoya, Mexico).

“We leave our families in our countries, sever our illusions of intellectual conquest, and abandon our own world in order to construct another one in this country. One of my goals is to read, write and pronounce correctly the English language; also to study at some college to reach a graduate program in Social Work” (Ana Cardenas, Guatemala).

“When we arrived in this country, we had a lot of dreams. The most important dream was to find a secure life for our family. We left our country because of violence. I have another dream: that one day everybody will have a good job and will provide a good education and stable life for their children. They are the future of the country” (Lucy Tabares, Colombia).

Attitudes toward persons crossing our borders are shaped by the number of immigrants coming, their racial and ethnic make-up, and the fact that the immigrant population tends to cluster in a small number of states. California hosts 40 percent of new immigrants, and along with Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and Arizona handles 75 percent of all legal immigrants in the United States. Seven states absorb the vast majority of immigrants and the density of the immigrant population in these areas feeds anxiety and tension among the host population.

While there are immigrants with low labor skills coming to our country, there are increasing numbers who are arriving with professional or high technical skills. Immigrants that utilized the services of the Howard Area Community Center in Chicago indicated that they were skilled technicians, contractors, professional musicians, linguists, artists, dancers, physicians, and health care professionals in their coun-

tries but could not find appropriate work to match their skills in the United States.

OUR ANCESTORS WERE MIGRANTS

The issue of immigration and refugees is not a unique phenomenon of the twentieth century. In the Old Testament we learn that being an immigrant or refugee was the condition of our spiritual ancestors. It was in these conditions that God revealed himself, and carried on salvation history. Examples of this are Abraham: "Abram went as the Lord directed him, and Lot went with him . . . and they set out for the land of Canaan" (Gen 12:4, 5); Joseph: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you once sold into Egypt. . . . It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you" (Gen 45:4, 5); Jacob: "Thus Jacob and all his descendants migrated to Egypt" (Gen 46:6); Ruth: "So they [Naomi and Ruth] went on together until they reached Bethlehem. Whose girl is this? . . . She is the Moabite girl who returned from the plateau of Moab with Naomi" (Ruth 1:19; 2:5, 6); Mary, Joseph, Jesus: "Get up and take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt" (Matt 2:13).

God had a definite affinity with those persons forced to live outside their own land. In Exodus we read "You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt." In Leviticus are found strict rules on how to treat immigrants:

When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God.

When the Israelites remembered their roots they showed great respect, and hospitality toward the immigrant and refugee.

A Call for Hospitality

We must remember that the United States wooed other peoples to come and settle, to serve as cheap labor, to develop the raw materials we thought necessary to our future. Too many of us blot out memories of the squalid, cramped quarters of urban tenements and rural sod houses where earlier generations of immigrants lived. We lack memories of the poor health practices, diseases, plagues, and early death from childbirth or accidents. We forget the poor wages, the misuse and abuse of workers our ancestors endured. We excuse the sin of slavery and its terrible effects that continue to plague us.

How many of us can speak about our roots, our ancestors' journeys, the different reasons why our forbears came to this land? Mine came to avoid the military draft in Germany and because the farms kept getting smaller as family fields were divided and sub-divided, making it very difficult to raise enough for one's family. To cope with the trauma of uprooting themselves and their kin from their homeland—roots, culture, memories—many of our forbears blocked it out, refusing to talk about it. Some changed their names, stopped using their language, hid their past, forgot their identity. By so doing they prevented us from feeling their pain and thus learning about the need for compassion and hospitality to others in like circumstances. Consequently, we, the descendants of immigrants, no longer reverence the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty: "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!" The same bigotry that was visited upon our ancestors is heaped upon the people crossing our borders today.

POSADA:

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE BORDER AND IMMIGRATION

The popular ritual *Posada* is celebrated in Mexico for nine days before Christmas. Everyone—diocesan groups, parish organizations, religious education students, seminarians, and religious congregations—participates in *Posada*, which means "home" or "shelter." The search of Mary and Joseph for a welcome, a place to stay, and assistance in need is reenacted, usually by the children. But more importantly, impromptu skits by the adults depict the search for hospitality, acceptance, assistance, by the modern day Marys and Josephs, i.e., the migrants within Mexico to the border, and immigrants who cross into the United States. These rituals provide the inspiration for social analysis and theological reflection rooted in the present reality of rejection, fear, and suspicion they experience. The ritual calls them to remember the Christian response of welcome and acceptance which should be offered to pilgrims who request hospitality.

The dialogue between the singers inside (representing those who have and are comfortable) and the singers outside the door (Mary and Joseph, pilgrims requesting hospitality) reflect the attitudes and responses toward immigrants we find in ourselves and the conversion of life demanded.

Outside: Who, to these poor pilgrims, shelter will be grudging, as
they come exhausted o'er highways trudging?

Inside: Who is this that asks me? Entrance I deny, for they may be
robbers who to steal would try.

Outside: Of your heart I'd rob you, not your goods or life, that you may give shelter to my loving wife.

Inside: There is not a corner free that we can spare. All outdoors is empty, seek your lodging there.

Outside: My dear wife is suff'ring, take her as your guest. She implores a corner in which she may rest.

Inside: Who is this that ruptures midnight's gentle peace? Go from hence, leave us, your entreaties cease.

Outside: In the Lord's name do this for my cherished spouse. She is cold and weary, open up your house.

Inside: Go, you foolish people, you become annoying. Leave us in peace, our rest you are destroying.

Outside: Save this lovely girl who stands beside me here. She is weak and can't endure the cold severe.

Inside: (The Welcome) Enter holy pilgrim, accept this place. Though poor, we present it from the heart. Let us sing with joy, with all considering, that Jesus, Joseph and Mary have come to be with us.

To Speak the Truth, to Live the Truth

Migration around the globe is caused by poverty, hunger, violence, disregard of human rights, and the search to advance economically, socially, intellectually. Rarely does a person migrate without a compelling motive. Unless the root causes are addressed, regionally or globally, we will not be able to stem the tide of immigration, either from across the oceans or over our land boundaries.

Walter Brueggemann states, "The replacing of numbness with compassion, that is, the end of cynical indifference and the beginning of noticed pain, signals a social revolution" (1978, 88). Compassion acknowledges the reality of another's pain; it takes the other seriously, admitting the hurt of another into our hearts. In response to the pain one can now think differently and be impelled to act. After one experiences the reality of the border, or of immigrants in urban areas or agricultural fields, hears their stories and feels their pain, a practicing Christian is changed. No longer can one say, "I didn't know, I hadn't heard, I don't believe." Christian knowledge, concern, pity must change to Christian response and action. Knowing and accepting the truth frees us to speak and live accordingly, frees us to be *Posada* people.

The wisdom of a believing community is a valuable resource in searching for guidance as to how to act out of our compassion. Catholic social teaching can affirm and guide Catholics and all people of

good will in their response to the plight of immigrants. This teaching can be summarized:

- Every person's human rights must be respected. This includes asylum from great peril, especially life threatening situations, and the right to emigrate to provide for the well-being of oneself and one's family.
- Territorial borders are useful but cannot be considered absolute in the face of legitimate human rights claims.
- Root causes of why people emigrate must be addressed by the nations of the world through the improvement of socioeconomic conditions in poor nations. Authentic development permits people to exercise their right to stay at home in their native country.
- The solidarity of the human family calls for short and long-term approaches to global migration. Bonds of solidarity cannot be broken by indifference.
- Hospitality is the paramount value and calls for change in our attitudes and actions as a nation.
- Punitive responses to migration, such as denying or limiting access to basic human services for immigrants, is unjust and creates a gap of "haves" and "have nots."
- Equity calls for a fair sharing of the burden by all states within our nation and by all nations in the global situation (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1996).

Parish Challenges to Posada

Unlike earlier Catholic immigrants, those entering today face a different reality. The agricultural system of small family farms has diminished considerably, cities and towns have been developed, and parishes are well established. With 80 percent of today's immigrants being people of color from third-world countries, they do not always find in the local parish an affinity of language, culture, and religious leadership to help them meet their needs or express their contribution to the parish. Many feel unwelcomed, largely ignored, or lost in a large parish. Encountering not so subtle attitudes such as "they ought to learn English" or "they're pushing us out of our parish" can drive immigrants away from the Catholic Church to embrace the hospitality, community, and real help offered by store-front Pentecostal or evangelical churches where their own language, culture, and leadership are used and affirmed. There are not many priests and sisters of their culture. Parishes cannot presume that existing practices and personnel best serve the needs of the immigrant.

To assist in responding to immigrant communities in the parish or city, a variety of resources are available to pastoral staffs, parish councils, and parish organizations. Both at the national level and in most dioceses there are offices established to promote pastoral care of immigrants and refugees. Frequently these offices can assist with resources for liturgy, hospitality, social justice groups, prayer and Scripture study groups, Catholic school and religious education programs, ecumenical and inter-cultural groups for social analysis, theological reflection, and social action.

The immigration reform of 1996 will have a large-scale impact on pastoral ministry. State Catholic conferences publish resource materials; for example, the Illinois Catholic Conference has a ten-page booklet entitled *Pastoral Response to Immigration Reform*. Social action groups can receive timely fact sheets, legislative alerts, or action-oriented activities from various immigration and/or welfare coalitions.

Some parishes network with parishes in the "home" countries of immigrants, even sending delegations to experience their culture and life, thus building a bridge for understanding, appreciation, and inclusion. Others develop lay leaders from already-established immigrants to welcome and identify the needs of newcomers. It is wise for parishes to have a referral system to social service agencies, ESL classes, free health clinics, or *pro bono* law services in the community. Many parishes are already publishing bilingual Sunday bulletins, developing a culturally-diverse choir to sing liturgical music, making sure that common events are culturally sensitive in order to demonstrate respect for the variety of cultures present in the community. Young adult groups, especially among the Hispanic, Philippine, and East Asian countries, are popular, as their cultures embrace community and family as a primary value. Parishes can promote the Jubilee 2000 Campaign which focuses on working toward the cancellation of the unpayable debts of poor nations.

The Individual Posada Christian

One does not have to wait for a parish response to exercise and live *Posada*. And one does not have to live in a large city to come into contact with immigrant populations. One-third of the population in Garden City, Kansas, is Asian and Hispanic. In rural Rusk County, Wisconsin, the largest minority population outside of the Native American is the Hmong. Immigrant advocacy groups will send their newsletters or information on legislative and policy action needed to make life more bearable for immigrants. There are border immersion experiences offered through college ministry organizations or social action groups. Border-links is an organization that links groups around the country to the border reality. A family can host exchange students from Central

America as a way to learn about the experience and the life of an immigrant. We can invite foreign students to our homes at holiday time.

Language training is a wonderful way to get a sense of the immigrant experience. Feel how difficult it is to learn vocabulary, make sentences, understand someone who speaks too rapidly or uses a large vocabulary. Know the frustration of not being able to really communicate your message or your feelings. Attend liturgies celebrated in other languages. There are many opportunities for volunteer work at social service agencies, for example, tutoring ESL students or assisting in translating at a doctor or dental appointment. Such experiences can teach us compassion toward new residents trying to learn the English language or adapt to a new culture while working two jobs or raising a family.

For Christians, *Posada* ought not be simply a Christmas-time ritual but an everyday challenge to cultivate the virtue of hospitality in an era of global migration.

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