



WHAT TO DO AFTER WELCOMING?

Immigration and Moral Dilemmas

BY RAFAEL GARCÍA, S.J.

Moral dilemmas force flexibility and creativity and reveal the fact that human laws are never without exceptions. One of these relates to the plight of migrants and refugees—the recently arrived and those established in our communities.

The Catholic Church, other Churches, many elected leaders, and people of good will support welcoming those whose lives are threatened by criminal elements or are fleeing war or systemic impoverishment. They have a right to migrate to save their lives and find a safe home, according to Catholic social teaching and human solidarity. The United States is one of those safe homes. The welcome is needed!

But once here, new challenges arise. How are those welcomed going to survive and provide for their families if they are legally prohibited from securing work? Is this major dilemma being adequately acknowledged and addressed by church and state? Those of us in ministry with migrants and refugees constantly see the detrimental effects of the *status quo* regarding illegality of working. Lack of work typically triggers many other problems that create individual and family deterioration.

The Church teaches that denial of work is a violation of a person's rights:

Work is a fundamental right and a good for mankind, a useful good, worthy of man because it is an

appropriate way for him to give expression to and enhance his human dignity ... Work is needed to form and maintain a family, to have a right to property, to contribute to the common good of the human family.¹

Unemployment, on the other hand, is a "real social disaster."²

Pope Francis prophetically addressed this dehumanizing *status quo* in his recent message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (January 14, 2018). He called for a 'four-step' response to the crisis of forced migration: welcome; protect; promote; integrate. Francis wrote:

When duly recognized and valued, the potential and skills of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are a true resource for the communities that welcome them... This is why I hope that, in countries of arrival, migrants may be offered freedom of movement, work opportunities, and access to means of communication, out of respect for their dignity.³

Since work is essential to dignity, Francis also urged "a determined effort to promote the social and professional inclusion of migrants and refugees, guaranteeing for all—including those seeking asylum—the opportunity for employment..."⁴

U.S. law prohibits undocumented immigrants from working. Obviously, many do find work, some due to courageous risk-taking by good, humanitarian employers. Others get work, but from unscrupulous labor contractors who mistreat and often force undocumented workers into slave-like working and living conditions. There are a multitude of other work situations.

Catholic social teaching acknowledges a moral dilemma when the rights of people seeking asylum interface with the rights of nations to control their borders. Solving this dilemma should move one to solidarity and the common good, not the letter of the law. In *Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope*, the U.S. and Mexican Bishops wrote:

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.⁵

Welcoming without adequate follow-up, sadly, also occurs with some in the “pro-life,” or more specifically, “pro-birth” movement. A consistent ethic of life recognizes that the willful destruction of unborn human life is an evil. Concern for a vulnerable life seems to change, though, once the baby has been “welcomed” into the world. Once born, an impoverished child and family face harsh policies that can eliminate crucial nutritional aid and pediatric care, policies very often supported by the same anti-abortion persons.

Catholic morality teaches that, if a person suffers hunger and the only way to get food is by unauthorized taking of it, this action should not be judged as stealing:

The seventh commandment forbids theft, that is, usurping another's property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing . . .) is to put at one's disposal and use the property of others.⁶

The emergency taking of food, however, is not a structural, institutional answer to extreme hunger. Similarly, permission to work needs a structural solution. This requires modifications in present laws. Freedom to work will be fruitful for many: the individual's dignity and ability to be productive; the family; civil society; and the tax system.

Although this is still an unfolding, unchartered reality, what will happen to the 800,000 or so DACA protected young people if they definitively lose their protection and

possibilities to work, study, and continue to be productive? Unable to work or study, will they go “underground”? This sudden free fall into “illegality” will be catastrophic psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally—catastrophic, also, for the life and economy of the nation. Where are they to go if they were brought to the U.S. as minor children? How are they supposed to make a livelihood?

Until lawmakers acknowledge and act on this dilemma and change laws, how can pro-life, pro-immigrant, pro-human dignity persons reach out to help these vulnerable families secure a livelihood? A true and consistent commitment to life demands astute and effective advocacy from people of faith. Human decency demands that lawmakers create new, realistic, life-respecting paths for those who are undocumented. This includes a path to work.

J. Kevin Appleby of the Center for Migration Studies recently laid out a “Catholic's immigration wish list” to create these paths:

- (1) a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States;
- (2) reform of the legal immigration system to increase efficiency and ensure that the United States can meet its labor demand;
- (3) strengthening the asylum system by ensuring due process protections, especially for unaccompanied minors;
- (4) removal of actual criminals, rather than enforcement against the vast majority of undocumented immigrants who are not criminal threats; and
- (5) addressing the push factors that force migrants to come to the United States, instead of building a wall along the US-Mexico border.⁷

With our consistent teaching on respect for life and family, we Catholics should be much more effective advocates to resolve the crucial dilemma of immigrants and work through comprehensive immigration reform.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2004) *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 287.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Pope Francis. (2017). Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States. (2003). *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, 36.
- ⁶ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. (1964) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2408.
- ⁷ J. Kevin Appleby. (2017, December 25). A Catholic's immigration wish list. *America*, 10.