

Fact of FAITH

Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity



THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

In this context of opportunity and challenge that is the new immigration, we bishops of the United States reaffirm the commitment of the Church, in the words of Pope John Paul II, to work “so that every person’s dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family which knows how to appreciate with discernment the different cultures which comprise

it” (Message for World Migration Day 2000, no. 5). We call upon all people of good will, but Catholics especially, to welcome the newcomers in their neighborhoods and schools, in their places of work and worship, with heartfelt hospitality, openness, and eagerness both to help and to learn from our brothers and sisters, of whatever race, religion, ethnicity, or background.

A Tradition of Welcome and Pastoral Concern

This call is based on the rich heritage of Scripture and the Church’s teaching. The patriarchs themselves were nomads. Settled by the hand of God in the time of Abraham, they soon migrated to Egypt, where they suffered oppression and were delivered once again by God’s hand. From this experience comes a deep appreciation for the plight of the migrant, underlined in the words of Scripture: “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” (Ex 23:9). “You shall treat the stranger 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 strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lv 19:33-34). The Torah made special provisions for immigrants with the reminder that “you too were once slaves in Egypt” (Dt 16:9-12): “At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithes of your produce for that year and deposit them in com-

munity stores, that the Levite who has no share in the heritage with you, and also the alien, the orphan and the widow who belong to your community, may come and eat their fill; so that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all that you undertake” (Dt 14:28-29).

Indeed, the experience of exile, oppression, and deliverance to the Promised Land is the central act of the drama of salvation for Judaism. In honor of God’s deliverance of his people, Israel was enjoined to show justice towards all: “For the Lord, your God, is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no bribes; who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Dt 10:17-19). Jesus echoes this tradition when he proclaims prophetically, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).

The Church has remained faithful to this call to care for migrants of all kinds and has responded accordingly over the centuries. The apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1952, takes its name from its evocation of the “émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt,” to which the pope pointed as “the archetype of every refugee family.” Pope Pius XII recalls a long tradition of papal solicitude for immigrants and refugees, noting the hospitality to strangers and refugees traditionally provided by the Holy See and recalling the words of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “We find in most countries, cities and dioceses people of diverse languages who, though bound by one Faith, have varied rites and customs. Therefore we strictly enjoin that the Bishops of these cities or dioceses provide the proper men, who will celebrate the Liturgical Functions according to their rites and languages.” The pope cites with pride, as one proof of the Church’s constant solicitude in this respect, the provisions for the establishment of “national parishes” in the United States in the

nineteenth century to accommodate the immigrants of that era.

The Second Vatican Council likewise called on the national bishops’ conferences to pay special attention to those who “are not adequately cared for by the ordinary pastoral ministry of the parochial clergy or are entirely deprived of it,” including “the many migrants, exiles and refugees,” and to devise solutions for them (*Christus Dominus*, no. 18), a call endorsed by Pope Paul VI in approving a revision of church norms regarding pastoral care for immigrants. His Instruction on the Pastoral Care of People Who Migrate affirmed that “migrating people carry with them their own mentality, their own language, their own culture, and their own religion. All of these things are parts of a certain spiritual heritage of opinions, traditions and culture which will endure outside the homeland. Let it be prized highly everywhere” (no. 11).

These words should apply with special force to members of the numerous Eastern Catholic Churches, who preserve ancient traditions of worship and practice reaching back to the days of the apostles. In full communion with the Catholic Church, they are the bearers of the authentic teachings of the Church, each according to their own traditions. Because of political upheaval, war, and religious persecution, the twentieth century saw an unprecedented emigration—one that continues today—of Eastern Catholics who are a minority in their countries of origin and who must struggle to maintain their faith and their traditions in the United States in the context of the predominant Latin Church.

Pope John Paul II urges in his apostolic letter *Orientalium Lumen* that a “conversion is . . . required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers, to the benefit of the entire catholic Communion” (no. 21).

The immigrants among us thus bring a richness that we are bound to embrace, for their sake and for our own. As Pope Paul VI noted, in words recently recalled by Pope John Paul II, “The Church can regard no one as excluded from its motherly embrace, no one as out-

side the scope of its motherly care. It has no enemies except those who wish to make themselves such. Its catholicity is no idle boast. It was not for nothing that it received its mission to foster love, unity and peace among men” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 94).

The pastoral statement Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity was developed by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration. It was approved by the full body of bishops at their November 2000 general meeting as a statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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Photo: CNS/Paul Haring

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