

Fleeing Herod

A significant feature of Advent/ Christmas is attending to the poor. There are toy drives for poor children, Christmas baskets for those without, Christmas Eve and Christmas day meals in social service settings with prominent political and Church figures serving, solicitation for donations from every helping agency, etc. Reaching out to the more prosperous to help the lesser and least at the heart of the Christmas season.

Among Christians, the rationale for this is often cited as “the poor Christ.” Jesus was born in impoverished conditions, in a stable because there was no room in the inn. Therefore, to celebrate his birth all the poor are welcomed and included.

But in our time an episode from the infancy narrative of St. Matthew that is closely aligned with poverty and vulnerability seems particularly relevant.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt ... for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” (Mt. 2: 13)

However the birth of Jesus is portrayed, the events after his birth are clear. The Holy Family are refugees.

This bare statement that Joseph, Mary, and the child are fleeing murderous intent connects them to our present planetary situation where millions of people are fleeing terror and violence. Every evening on television news we see the suffering on families on the run in excruciating detail. The word migration is too neutral. The more appropriate name is escape. Herod, in multiple modern guises, is still insidiously at work.

The Catholic Health Care tradition has always been fiercely committed to welcoming the poor and vulnerable. This conviction has led the people of Catholic Health Care to embrace the virtue of solidarity. Solidarity is living in connection with the poor and disadvantaged and working to alleviate their conditions.

It is never obvious what solidarity with the refugees entails. It may mean taking up a certain stand in conversations, or advocating for positions through political forums, or donating to causes, or joining efforts to help out in certain situations. But once this Christmas solidarity is in place, it will find a way, sometimes small and sometimes large, to express itself.

In Lent of 2019, a large sculpture will be erected in St. Peter's square in Rome. It is a boat with many people squeezed into it, a symbol of the refugee migration of the Mediterranean world. The title of the sculpture is "Angels Unaware."

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware." (Heb. 13:2)