A Catholic Ethic For Immigration

ATTENDING TO SOCIAL SIN AND SOLIDARITY

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After decades of congressional inaction on the nation's outdated immigration legislation, and amid polarizing political rhetoric, recent changes to federal admission and deportation policies have unleashed fear in immigrant communities. These moves threaten to harm already vulnerable asylum seekers and divide families of mixed immigration status. They also endanger the nation's deepest values and its standing in the world.

The Catholic social tradition's teachings on immigration are rooted in biblical injunctions to welcome the stranger, but they also are borne of the teachings on universal human rights, understanding of the political community as oriented to serve the common good, and the tradition's global rather than nationalistic perspective. The Catholic notion of social sin — individuals participating in harmful structures — significantly extends responsibility for undocumented migration beyond individuals who cross borders. Catholic thought since the second half of the 20th century indicates how those who participate in sustaining dehumanizing conditions also are complicit in creating them.

CATHOLIC TRADITION ON MIGRATION

The Catholic social tradition reflects on urgent moral questions in light of insights from scripture and church teaching. Its official documents, issued primarily by popes, take up pressing social topics of the day, ranging from globalization to family life to environmental justice. The tradition is rooted in an understanding of every person as created in the image of God, and, therefore, inherently sacred and made for community. Drawing on these key commitments to human dignity and solidarity, it suggests norms for thinking about complex problems as well as directives for action.

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The tradition began out of concern for labor exploitation in the late 19th century. Pope Leo XIII warned in 1891 that neither human nor divine laws permit employers to exploit people for profit. This concern for economic justice has continued through the years, evident in the church's commitment to workers' rights and attention to the moral dimensions of market activity. Most recently, it has been evident in Pope Francis' condemnations of harmful global economic practices. The Catholic social tradition defends a full range

of rights for all persons: civil and political rights, such as freedom of conscience, but also more robust social and economic rights and responsibilities, such as the right to fair wages.

The Catholic immigration ethic emerges from this long tradition of defending universal human rights. It argues that people have a right not to be forced to migrate. That is, people should be able to fulfill their human rights to the basic goods and opportunities that allow them to live a life of dignity in their homeland. At the same time, however, the tradition also upholds people's right to migrate if they cannot support themselves or their families in their country of origin. In other words, in situations where individuals face pervasive gang violence or desperate poverty, the tradition supports their right to migrate so they can live free from credible fears of violence or the inability to feed their children.

Once people do emigrate, the Catholic tradition profoundly critiques patterns wherein receiving countries accept the labor of undocumented workers without offering them the legal protections of citizenship. The church has raised concerns that while countries like the United States hold up "No Trespassing" signs at their borders, they still show "Help Wanted" signs at workplaces.[1] Such practices risk creating a permanent underclass, leading to exploitation of laborers and a two-tiered society. This harms human dignity and the common good alike.

While the social tradition recognizes a nation's right to control its borders, the right is not understood to be absolute. The value of securing borders has to be weighed against the demands of social justice. For example, in the case of blatant human rights violations, state sovereignty rights become less important than protecting human dignity. In this regard, more than a decade ago the U.S. and Mexican bishops urged both countries to address the root causes of and legal avenues for migration.[2] In their joint pastoral letter, they noted the need to develop the economies of nations like Mexico and reduce the backlog of family visas. In contrast to these recommendations, border enforcement has remained the primary focus of U.S. policy.

SOCIAL SIN AND INJUSTICE

The Catholic tradition's emphasis on serving the global common good sets the individual acts of migrants or refugees in a broader context and underscores social dimensions of justice and complicity alike. Pope Francis repeatedly has emphasized solidarity with migrants. In 2013, he made his first papal visit outside of Rome to the Italian island of Lampedusa, the landing place for thousands of refugees crossing the sea from North Africa. In 2016, during a trip to the Greek island of Lesbos, he visited a migrant detention facility and took a dozen Syrian refugees back to Rome.

In his witness on migration, Pope Francis has called attention to different social sins, such as a "globalization of indifference" and international economic structures that pull migrants across borders like pawns on a chessboard. His April 28, 2014, tweet that "inequality is the root of social evil" flags the significance of social sin and injustice.

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Distinct elements of social sin — dehumanizing trends, unjust structures and harmful ideologies — shape complex dynamics. Powerful narratives that cast immigrants as security threats or "takers" can influence our personal roles in collective actions — or inaction. Whether in forms of cultural superiority or profiteering, social inducements to personal sin abound in the immigration context.

Hence, socioeconomic and political structures that lead to undocumented immigration frequently are connected to the ideological blinders that obstruct hospitality to immigrants.[3] For example, in U.S. immigration policy, the primacy of deterrence has made concern for human rights or family unity second to security concerns.

When concerns about national identity get distorted by xenophobia and fear, anti-immigrant sentiment and ethnic-based hate crimes surge. At a more subtle level, consumerism can shape citizens' willingness to underpay or mistreat migrant laborers, either directly or indirectly through demand for inexpensive goods and services. Hence a preoccupation with "having" over "being" can impede solidarity with immigrants as much as distorted nationalism.

A Catholic ethic calls for not only defending human rights or providing hospitality to strangers, but also unmasking the complex structures and ideologies that abet personal complicity in preventing justice for migrants. Viewing immigration through the lens of individual culpability alone — simply asking, "What part of illegal don't you understand?"— obscures the multileveled, subtle dynamics at play.

SOLIDARITY WITH MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

These entrenched, intertwined patterns of social sin require repentance from sinful patterns and mindsets that marginalize and disempower those beyond our immediate spheres of concern and borders. From new awareness of and responsibility for our complicity, we are called to conversion toward interdependence in solidarity. Such conversion can occur through personal encounters and relationships that provoke new perspectives and receptivity. At the broader systemic level, nations must understand themselves to be collectively responsible for the large number of migrant deaths and the reasons refugees feel compelled to cross borders.

Pope John Paul II declared solidarity as the virtue most needed in a globalized era of *de facto* interdependence: the social face of Christian love. Jesuit social ethicist David Hollenbach has proposed institutional solidarity as a necessary means of moving patterns of global interdependence from ones marked by domination and oppression to ones marked by equality and reciprocity.

Institutional solidarity demands the development of structures that offer marginalized persons a genuine voice in the decisions and policies that impact their lives. It demands the inclusion of comprehensive sets of stakes at the decision-making table, structures of institutional accountability and transparency, and empowered participation (subsidiarity).[4] For example, affirming the voices of transnational or grassroots organizations in trade negotiations that traditionally have favored political and economic elites would help to uphold human rights, environmental concerns and just labor practices.

In light of the depth and lure of sinful resistance to the steep challenges of global solidarity, two additional aspects of solidarity are required: incarnational and conflictual solidarities. Incarnational solidarity departs from valuable intellectual and institutional dimensions of solidarity to immerse us in practices of concrete accompaniment in the real world. Social ethicist Christine Firer Hinze's evocative metaphor for the reach of consumerism reflects the dynamics of social sin: A culture whose "kudzu-like values and practices so crowd the landscape of daily lives that solidarity finds precious little ground in which to take root."[5]

She highlights the culture of consumerism's use of seduction and misdirection to "lay a soothing, obfuscating mantle over systemic injustices that solidarity would expose, [as] its participants are fitted with Oz-like lenses, fed a stream of distractions and novelties, and situated in a 24/7 schedule of work-spend-consume that virtually ensures they will 'pay no attention' to the suffering multitudes behind the curtain."[6]

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When unjust international structures in need of reform are connected to these pervasive ideologies, an "incarnational" solidarity like the one Hinze has proposed can complement the institutional solidarity advanced above.

Promoting solidarity among institutions and persons cannot bypass conflict and loss. Both liberation theologians and social ethicists have

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noted the magisterial church's tendency to prioritize unity, harmony and synthesis in order to circumvent conflict that is necessary. Without confronting issues of economic and political power and engaging grassroots mobilization, work toward implementing changes to the status quo will remain stunted. Contesting inequalities also requires a tolerance for disagreement and may entail lament or righteous anger — in short, the recalcitrance of the privileged may demand a more "conflictual solidarity."[7]

The dynamics of social sin demand an enduring commitment to various modes of solidarity with migrants. Bringing about conversion from patterns of unjust complicity calls communities to move beyond intermittent outreach ministry or legislative advocacy, though both of those remain important. The witness of churches or other institutions that provide sanctuary to vulnerable migrants would be strengthened by prophetic efforts that foster repentance from complicity in patterns of social sin, including the sin of national exceptionalism rooted in claims that America is "first" or inherently superior. In keeping with the model of Lampedusa, our public repentance for past cooperation with forms of social sin could begin to convert communities away from entitlement and toward solidarity with those on the underside of such histories.

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NOTES

1. Richard McBrien, "Sign Says 'No Trespassing' at the Border, 'Help Wanted' at the Workplace," *National Catholic Reporter*, (Nov. 16, 2007) www.natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2007d/111607/111607y.htm.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, S*trangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, (Jan. 22, 2003) www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm.
3. For a discussion of how ideologies and structures are dynamically interrelated in this way, each serving as causes and effects of injustice, see Kristin Heyer,"Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2010) 410-36.
4. David Hollenbach, *Common Good & Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 225.
5. Christine Firer Hinze, "Straining Toward Solidarity in a Suffering World: *Gaudium et Spes* 'After Forty Years,'" in *Vatican II: Forty Years Later*, College Theology Society Annual Volume 51, ed. William Madges (2006), 165-95 at 180.
6. Hinze, 181-82.
7. Bryan Massingale, "*Vox Victimarum, Vox Dei*: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 65 (2010): 63-88 at 84.

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