

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me

IMMIGRANTS DESERVE JUSTICE, CARE

By SR. ANN SCHOLZ, SSND, PhD

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me. I assure you, as often as you did it for the least among you, you did it for me.”

— Matthew 25:35-40

The U.S. immigration system is broken, badly broken. It is woefully outdated, needlessly complex and most agree that it is patently unfair. Backlogs in the family-sponsored immigration system mean U.S. citizens have to wait up to 20 years to be reunited with their loved ones. Current caps on employment visas make it impossible for employers to fill critical jobs in fields from agriculture to high tech, and foreign graduates, educated here, are too often denied the opportunity to put their training to use in growing the U.S. economy.

In addition, the current system puts at risk far too many vulnerable immigrants, including unaccompanied minors, victims of crime and domestic violence and those fleeing persecution. Too many unscrupulous employers exploit unauthorized workers and fail to protect the rights of both foreign and domestic laborers and, too often, unauthorized immigrants caught up in the system are denied due process of the law.

As a result, more than 11 million of our brothers and sisters are consigned to life in the shadows. Like so many before them, they came to these shores in search of the promise of these United States. They came looking for a place where their families would be safe, their children could be educated and their ingenuity and hard work would be rewarded. Instead, they have been forced to live in fear of exploitation, deportation and separation from their families.

Evelyn is just one of thousands whose families have been torn apart by our bro-

ken immigration system. In 1991, when she was 3 years old, her parents brought her to the United States from Colombia and overstayed their tourist visa. They hoped to provide a better life for their children. They came in search of the American Dream, a life free from violence and drugs and a chance for Evelyn and her sisters to receive a good education.

When Evelyn was a senior in high school, her mother was stopped for driving without a license. Detained for months, she eventually was deported, leaving behind a husband and three daughters, one a U.S. citizen.

Evelyn’s father was left to raise his daughters alone, and life was difficult for everyone. The loss of their mother’s income put a strain on family finances, and all three girls — who missed their mother every single day — had to grow up too quickly. Because she could not enter the United States, their mom missed countless family celebrations —



graduations, birthdays and holidays, as well as the wedding of Evelyn's sister.

After six years of separation, Evelyn finally was able to see and touch her mother, thanks to an immigrant youth-led organization called United We Dream that helped Evelyn and her mother each travel to the border towns of Nogales. Evelyn

stood on one side of the fence, in Nogales, Ariz., her mother stood on the other side, in Nogales, Mexico. They could talk and reach through the fence to touch each other.

Here is how Evelyn described the reunion:

"After being separated from my mother — the woman who made me the woman I am today —

the woman who taught me about courage and love — I was able to see her through an orange-red rusted fence this past summer. I remember being excited for weeks. I was finally going to be reunited with my mom. That excitement vanished as soon as I saw her on the other side of the border. Every feeling one could ever experience hit me at once. To be able to touch her soft skin and feel her strong hug in those moments turned my anger,

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frustration and hurt into action, to keep fighting for her and for countless others who long for their mother's hug.”

These immigrants are our neighbors and friends. They are our parents and grandparents, our siblings and cousins. They grow and process our food. They care for our young children and our aging parents. They serve in our armed forces and in our schools and hospitals. They contribute to our communities in countless ways, often at great cost to themselves and their families.

Our faith teaches us of a creator who so loved us that our God took human flesh, became one of us and continues to walk among us. We believe that our God is incarnate in the refugee father, the immigrant mother, the parentless child. Our Scriptures challenge us to heal and teach, to touch and hear, to recognize and welcome the stranger among us who is the face of God.

The Catholic Church is an immigrant church in an immigrant land. From the arrival of the first Spanish missionaries in 1493, our faith has been nurtured and nourished in mission churches and ethnic parishes. Ours is a church that still prays and sings in Polish and Spanish, Tagalog and Igbo, as well as all manner of accented English.

For women religious, the struggle for immigrants' rights is personal. Catholic sisters began coming to these shores 286 years ago as immi-

grants, to serve immigrant populations. We continue to minister with these aspiring citizens in schools and hospitals, in the fields and in the cities. We see the devastating effects of the brokenness of the current immigration system every day. We share the pain of mothers separated from their children and fathers who have risked their lives for love of their families. We know the sorrow of siblings who have not seen each other since their youth, and grandparents who fear they will never know their grandchildren.

Ours is a faith that does justice. We are committed to the precepts of Catholic social teaching that remind us the dignity of the person is at the core of our moral vision of society; how we organize our society affects human dignity directly; and any deliberately cruel or inhumane system must be changed. Most people of faith agree that the present U.S. immigration system fails the test. Our faith and simple justice demand

that the system be changed.

The present immigration system too often splits families, separates spouses and keeps parents from their children. Too frequently, due process procedures are ignored and immigrants' rights violated. The present system creates conditions that permit the exploitation of workers and can endanger the well-being of children. This broken immigration system costs our economy, violates our most treasured values and threatens our souls.

Our nation needs, our people deserve and our faith demands that we build an immigration system that treats all people with dignity and provides the opportunity for them to flourish as God intends. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States, is committed to seeking immigration reform that will honor the rights of all individuals to be with their families; to be treated with dignity in the workplace; to seek safety from poverty, persecution and violence; to due process protections; and to gain citizenship.

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