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A call to open our hearts to migrants and refugees

By Mario J. Paredes

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POPE FRANCIS HAS URGED WORLD LEADERS and the people they govern to open their hearts to the stranger already in their midst or seeking desperately to gain entry to their countries. In his message for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees—to be observed Sept. 26, 2021—the Pontiff presents his vision of a world in which “all peoples are united in peace and harmony, celebrating the goodness of God and the wonders of creation.”

The Pope said that “we must make every effort to break down the walls that separate us and, in acknowledging our profound interconnection, build bridges that foster a culture of encounter. Today’s migration movements offer an opportunity for us to overcome our fears and let ourselves be enriched by the diversity of each person’s gifts. Then, if we so desire, we can transform borders into privileged places of encounter.”

To turn “our borders into privileged places of encounter”—what a powerful call to humanize US immigration policy and move it beyond the legalism that protects narrow political and economic interests at the expense of millions of suffering men, women, and children. Granted, the Pope’s perspective on a complex reality sets the bar very high. Yet, something must be done to begin to abet the massive suffering of those seeking access to the US to flee tyranny, violence, hunger, or poverty.

First and foremost, immigration reform that even modestly echoes the papal vision has to be a bipartisan effort. Today, the issue is a political football, with both parties opposing genuine, far-reaching reform efforts that would promise to deliver votes to the party pushing for such change. The Biden Administration is making some welcome changes to Trump-era policies, but it is stopping short of transforming the system. Real change would put the spotlight on and acknowledge the human drama that—here and around the world—impels refugees and migrants to take huge risks in seeking safety and prosperity.

US immigration policy remains a patchwork, while a holistic vision is urgently called for. What is needed is a significant overhaul that promises to bring comfort to millions living in fear and darkness, and suffering abuse and mistreatment.

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Some painful truths must be openly discussed. One is the fact that racism is a key factor obstructing change. At both the leadership and grassroots level, there is sheer prejudice against people of color and different cultural backgrounds. Some of it finds expression—in the US and around the world—in what Pope Francis calls “myopic and aggressive forms of nationalism.”

Then there is the persistent myth that immigrants, legal and otherwise, take jobs away from US citizens. The truth is that the work these newcomers do—cleaning, dishwashing, various forms of hard labor, etc., all underpaid—is looked down upon and rejected by Americans. That is true also for the work that brings migrant workers to this country, back-breaking work tilling the soil. Lacking alternatives, these workers overstay their visas and end up like bonded laborers, lacking any legal standing. It should also be noted that most undocumented workers—so highly vulnerable to exploitation—pay taxes!

According to official data, there are an estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants in the US, but the actual total may be significantly higher. There are also untold millions of young men who were born here of undocumented parents or who arrived when they were very young. Many have gone to college. But because of their parents’ immigration status, they lack the documents that would allow them to fully integrate into US society—they are at risk of being deported, sent ‘home’ to a country where they never lived or which they left as very young children.

Leaving aside the multitudes clamoring at our border for entry, these young men, like their parents, are begging to stay in the US. There is a clear injustice here. The US should offer both generations a path to citizenship that does not take 10 or 20 years. As it stands, the country has condemned them to live in the shadows without any rights for many years.

It behooves us as a nation founded on Judeo-Christian principles to promote policies that respect the human dignity of all those seeking shelter in the US. We need laws that acknowledge the common humanity that unites us all, regardless of skin color, socio-economic status, or legal standing. The earth, said Pope Francis, is our “common home.”

The Pope has called for “a personal and collective commitment that cares for all our brothers and sisters who continue to suffer, even as we work towards more sustainable, balanced, and inclusive development. A commitment that makes no distinction between natives and foreigners, between residents and guests, since it is a matter of a treasure we hold in common, from whose care and benefits no one should be excluded.”

Now, there is a vision for immigration reform. In the end, said the Pontiff, “we are like many grains of salt, all different and unique but which together can form a beautiful beach, a true work of art.”



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