

MARYLAND BISHOPS ISSUE PASTORAL LETTER ADDRESSING MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION

September 2010

As our nation continues its troubled and hesitant course toward addressing the challenge of immigration, we are moved to write to remind you of the biblical values and imperatives that should guide our treatment of newcomers and sojourners.

1 - A world on the move

A world in which, increasingly, people move across national borders can be unsettling. Displacement occurs both for those who move and for those into whose midst they arrive. It can be too easy to forget our common humanity and to stereotype the “other.” But our faith teaches us something different. It teaches us that all of us are children of God, made in God’s image, and blessed by God’s unending love. In a world on the move, we need to learn, as people in every age have needed to learn, to welcome the stranger, to embrace the Other.

Borders exist to promote security, to protect us economically, politically, and militarily. But borders exclude others even as they include us, and that distinction between “us” and “them,” between inclusion and exclusion, diminishes us as much as it diminishes those who are excluded. In God’s economy, where all are created in God’s image, exclusion is always diminishment.

God created us, and blessed us, and made us responsible for one another. We can choose to be delighted at the variety of God’s creation, including the variety of human beings, or we can choose to be dismayed, or frightened, or alarmed. Certainly in the years since September 11, 2001, our country has often seemed to be frightened by “foreignness” and has reacted protectively. Furthermore, in the recent economic recession, many Americans have been fearful of immigrant and migrant labor, suspicious that those who cross borders to obtain work will somehow diminish our own quality of life and decrease our incomes.

Fear should not guide our public policies. They lead, for example, to such anomalies as a highly-fortified border with Mexico, and a much more weakly maintained border with Canada, even though many would-be terrorists have entered the U.S. through Canada and few if any through Mexico. Fear and protectionism also lead our nation to illogical and carelessly-constructed rules – rules that do not produce the desired effect, but that hinder our national well-being.

God’s dream for us is freedom and joy and mutual flourishing. Only when we contribute to each other’s flourishing, both within and beyond national borders, do we honor the image of God that we all share.

Consider our own history. We all are descended from people who were strangers in a foreign land. Most of us, save Native Americans, come from immigrant stock, whether from people who migrated with dreams of a better life or from people who were brought here forcibly in chains. Some of us fled oppression. Others of us came with a sense of a God-given right to develop a “new world.” Whether our lived experience, and that of our ancestors, has been of struggle and thriving, or of unrewarded exertion, God’s desire is for every one of us to flourish, and our history shows that we are most likely to thrive when we help and care one another.

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Consider those "caught" in illogical immigration scenarios. Our national immigration system was not devised and is not prepared for a globalized world where finance and information and goods flow freely; because our system is inadequate, the people who provide vital goods and services do not move freely. Sometimes there is no line to join to apply for a visa, or the line seems to move backward rather than forward. Children are forced to wait more than a decade to join their parents. Consider the dialysis patients in Atlanta who were unable, as undocumented workers, to get health insurance, and who are losing their only means of getting dialysis because a charity hospital is closing its clinic. Consider the high school valedictorian in our own state who could not go to college because, even though he had never lived in any state but Maryland since coming to this country, he would be charged out-of-state tuition and would be denied financial aid because he is an immigrant. Consider the priests and pastors who have been forced to leave flourishing ministries because they could not obtain a "green card."

Consider the contributions of immigrants in our lives at this moment. In all likelihood, each one of us encounters immigrants every week, if not every day, of our lives: teachers in our schools and colleges; doctors and nurses in hospitals; care-givers in nursing homes and day-care centers; business owners, mechanics, engineers, bank employees, sales clerks, custodians, cab and bus drivers. Interestingly, we find that antipathy toward our immigrant sisters and brothers often disappears completely when we encounter them in our own lives. How can we not appreciate the person who cares for our elderly parent, the teacher who helps our child in school, the fellow parishioner who gives such loving service to church and community? When we know such people, we come to value them.

Consider the economic contributions immigrants make in our country. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, work hard. Their labor helps to strengthen our economy. Our Social Security system would find it even more difficult to meet its commitments were it not for hard-working immigrants. Ironically, millions of undocumented workers may never receive Social Security benefits because of their immigration status, even though they have paid hundreds of billions of dollars into the system.

Consider the international connections of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Maryland. Many Episcopalians do not realize that the Episcopal Church is not just a U.S. entity, but encompasses twelve overseas dioceses in Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia. Our own diocese sponsors youth trips to Central America each year, and several of our churches have mission relationships with churches, schools, and other institutions in Haiti. In addition, we have now or have had in the past companion-diocese relationships in Africa and Asia. All these relationships bring opportunities to learn and serve in other countries and cultures, experiences that are often life-forming and life-changing. When we participate in migration, even as temporary visitors to another country, we see more clearly how hospitality, respect, and welcome bring God's people together.

2 - Biblical resources for understanding the issues

As we say so often in the Episcopal Church, we base our understanding of how to live in God's world on the "three-legged stool" of scripture, tradition, and reason. Scripture teaches us the principles by which the people of God learned to live in relationship with God, as well as the events of our history as God's people and as followers of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Tradition teaches us the hard-won insights of generations of Christians, from the early church until today. And reason shows us how we can apply those principles in new and changing situations. All three – scripture, tradition, and reason – are gifts of God to be used reverently and wisely.

Scripture teaches us that we are created in the image of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ. In considering the challenges posed by immigration, we must first recall that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). This essential insight underlies our understanding of human rights. All human beings have inherent worth and intrinsic dignity. Worth and dignity are not bestowed by governments or constitutions, nor can they be undermined by vulnerability or neediness. Rather, we are taught to respect and value every human being because all are created in the image of God.

Furthermore, we are all redeemed in Jesus Christ: Our Lord gave his life for all people, and therefore all are worthy of respect. John Wesley gives one classic expression to this idea: "A poor wretch comes to me for an alms: I look and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit, made to know and love and dwell with God to eternity: I honor him for his Creator's sake. I see through all these rags that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ. I love him for the sake of his Redeemer. The courtesy therefore which I feel and show toward him is a mixture of the honour and love which I bear to the offspring of God, the purchase of his Son's blood, and the candidate for immortality." Wesley brings together the themes of creation and redemption and shows that the love and respect we show our fellow human beings is done for the sake of their Creator and Redeemer.

The worth, dignity, rights, and responsibilities of people are grounded in their creation and redemption. We must always remember that immigration is about the human beings who cross borders. The dignity and rights of human beings transcend national borders and they transcend human categories that might diminish worth. The real value and worth of people is grounded in their creation in the image and likeness of God and in the fact that Christ deemed them worthy of his complete self-offering.

The very concept of God's chosen people in the Old Testament is of a people moving across borders, and recognizing others who move across borders. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers were wanderers, who lived at times as alien sojourners in lands not their own. Moses led the people of Israel on a forty-year journey from Egypt to the land of Canaan. When the Israelites settled in the land of promise, their laws explicitly protected others who were wanderers and sojourners. The experiences of the people of Israel as aliens, wanderers, refugees, and deportees thus influenced their laws and view of sojourners.

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In a time when kinship was the guarantor of security and status, sojourners were particularly vulnerable to the chances and changes of life since they lacked a network of family within which people inherited property, owned land for producing crops, and had built-in connections for food, lodging, and care for physical and social well-being. Their status as people at risk was noted and Israelite laws were intended to protect them in their vulnerability.

Both Old and New Testaments offer many examples of hospitality to strangers. When we think of hospitality today, we may not think of welcoming the stranger. Perhaps our first images of hospitality will be of having friends or family over for a meal, or of the “hospitality industry” of hotels and restaurants. However, the hallmark of hospitality in biblical literature is the welcoming of strangers, and as John Koenig has noted, in the ancient world hospitality was seen as one of the “pillars of morality upon which the universe stands.” Hospitality arises from a sacred bond between guest and host and when they violate their “obligations to each other, the whole world shakes and retribution follows.”

In the Old Testament, hospitality was central to the identity of the people of God. God called Abraham away from family and homeland to be a stranger in a foreign land. God promised that Abraham would have many descendants and a land for them to inhabit, but even in the midst of these promises, God warned that fulfillment would come only after Abraham’s descendants had the experience of being sojourners and slaves in a land that was not their own (Gen 15:5-21). When Israel finally inherited the promised land and after the sojourn in Egypt, God reminded them that the land still belonged to the Lord. The ancient Israelites were to see themselves as strangers and sojourners even in their own land. God owned the land and they were to be its stewards and caretakers.

The Israelites’ experience shaped their attitudes toward strangers. As Exodus 23:9 tells us: “You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Knowing the heart of a stranger, Israel was to show hospitality to the strangers in its midst.

Perhaps the best known hospitality story in the Old Testament is the beautiful story of Abraham’s hospitality whereby he entertained “angels unawares.” As Abraham sat in his tent on a hot day, the Lord appeared to him in the form of three men standing outside. When Abraham saw the men, he ran out to greet them and entreated them to stop for a while and to refresh themselves. He then ran inside, and he and Sarah prepared a meal for their guests. Like a good host, Abraham “waited on them” while they ate.

One of the men asks, “Where is your wife Sarah?” Abraham replies that she is in the tent. The man then promises that in a year’s time when he returns, Sarah will have borne a son. The promises of God to Abraham and the people of God are made manifest in a story about welcoming the stranger. Hospitality, it turns out, is not just a pillar of morality in ancient Israel, but also a means by which people are blessed.

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is notable because hospitality is shown by a gentile who in turn receives blessing. In a time of famine and drought, Elijah went to a foreign town and asked a widow to show him hospitality. The widow

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responded to Elijah's request for food and drink by telling Elijah that she had so little that she did not expect her son and herself to survive. Elijah, however, assured the widow that if she shared what she had with him, the God of Israel would provide for her needs. Her meager supply of food sustained all three of them, and Elijah restored her son to life after he was stricken by an illness. Through the hospitality of a foreign widow the blessing and mercy of the God of Israel was experienced.

In the New Testament, we see the importance of hospitality especially in the teaching and table fellowship of Jesus. In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus overturns conventional notions of hospitality when he gives instruction on who is to be invited to a banquet: "When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the cripples, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." In these instructions, Jesus calls on earthly hosts to anticipate the hospitality of God's kingdom. The Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24) provides the context for understanding Jesus' instructions to earthly hosts. In the great banquet in the Kingdom of God, the same four groups (the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind) that Jesus tells earthly hosts to invite are also brought into the Great Feast. The implication is clear: just as God will welcome the vulnerable into the great banquet in the Kingdom, so also earthly hosts should open their tables to those in need. The character of God's hospitality should guide earthly behavior. Jesus demonstrated this hospitality in his own table fellowship in which he welcomed sinners and tax collectors. By welcoming the weak and vulnerable we anticipate and reflect the welcome of God.

The importance of hospitality is also seen in Jesus' teaching on the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46. The passage states that the Son of Man will separate the nations as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. To the sheep on his right hand the king will say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me . . ." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? . . ." And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

People who have welcomed strangers and who have met the needs of the vulnerable, have welcomed Christ himself, and will themselves be welcomed into the Kingdom. God's invitation to the Kingdom is tied to the hospitality to the stranger in this life. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" is the hallmark of New Testament hospitality. In it, Jesus points to a fundamental identification between himself and the "least of these." Hospitality toward the weak and vulnerable therefore becomes a way in which we meet Christ today in his "distressing disguise." As was the case in the Old Testament, hospitality is not only a virtue and pillar of morality, but also a means of blessing and the context in which God's promises are made known.

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Many other passages in the New Testament urge us to offer gracious welcome to others. The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means “love” (*phileo*) of “strangers” (*xenos*). In other words, hospitality is a concrete expression of love, not just love for sisters and brothers, but also love extended outward to the stranger.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, hospitality was a virtue and a pillar of morality that was expressed by welcoming the stranger. In the gracious interaction of hosts and guests God's promises were made known and blessing ensued for all involved. A biblical understanding of hospitality encourages us not only to think about the moral dimensions of immigration reform, but also to also look further to the potential blessings that may come when we welcome the stranger in our midst.

The gospels also show Jesus' special concern for and ministry to outsiders. At the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus went to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, where he read from the Isaiah scroll: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Persons in the synagogue received Jesus' message well, until he told the stories of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and of Elisha and Namaan the Syrian which demonstrated God's grace and mercy extending to Gentiles. The stories so enraged his listeners that they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. Jesus' proclamation that God's love extended to Gentiles and others who were considered outsiders challenged many people in his day.

Two stories about Samaritans illustrate even more fully Jesus' embrace of outsiders. The region of Samaria was situated south of Galilee and north of Judea. Centuries of antagonism between Jews and Samaritans caused most Jews to perceive Samaritans as a loathsome people. John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus conversing with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. That Jesus would talk to a Samaritan woman is remarkable because a tradition at the time viewed Samaritan women as unclean. The woman in the story recognizes this herself when she says, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.)” But this tradition does not deter Jesus from engaging the woman in conversation, and in the give and take of the exchange Jesus reveals that he is the Messiah. The result is that the woman brings others to hear Jesus and through her witness many Samaritans believe in him. In this exchange, we see that Jesus' ministry extended to those who were considered outsiders.

The second story is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells this story in response to a question from a scribe about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking what it says in the law, to which the scribe responds to love God and to love your neighbor. Jesus says do this and you will live, but the scribe presses the issue by asking “who is my neighbor?”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is the answer Jesus gives. It is a complicated answer. The scribe was asking Jesus to identify the neighbor whom he was to love. But Jesus answers with a story that identifies the person who *acts* like a neighbor. In the story, a man is attacked by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. First, a priest comes upon him, but rather than stop and help, he passes by on

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the other side of the road. Second, a Levite comes upon him, and he also passes him by on the other side of the road. Finally, a Samaritan comes by, and moved by compassion, he stops and treats the man's wounds and then takes him to an inn and provides for his care. The surprise in the story is that the loathsome Samaritan, rather than the religious leaders, turns out to be the true neighbor who shows love. Jesus tells a story about an outsider to demonstrate to the scribe what it means to be a true neighbor.

In the gospels we read many examples of Jesus showing that God's love and mercy extends to people who were considered outsiders in his day – the poor, the sick, women, gentiles and Samaritans. God's love and care do not stop at the boundary markers many people in his day set up for themselves. Rather, God's love extends to all, and by extension so should our love of neighbor. Through his life and ministry, Jesus showed us that the command to love our neighbor includes those we oftentimes view as outsiders. When we think about immigration reform, we are called to remember that the people whom many would label outsiders are our neighbors whom we are commanded to love.

3 - Other resources from church teaching and tradition

In the early church, the practice of hospitality was a way in which Christians sought to meet the physical and spiritual needs of all human beings. Early Christian hospitality was distinctive in the ancient world because it was not limited to family, friends, and influential people. Rather, the hallmark of hospitality in the early church was its emphasis on including the poor and the needy, people who could not repay their hosts. Hospitality, therefore, was a way of recognizing the equal value and dignity of all people. The table fellowship that was central to early Christian hospitality extended the care and concern of the Christian community beyond just friends and family to include the most vulnerable members of society.

In the fourth century, the Christian writer Lactantius contrasted the practice of Christian hospitality with the type of hospitality recommended by Cicero. For Cicero, like many classical writers, hospitality was a way to achieve mutual advantage and benefit between hosts and guests. As such, in Cicero's view, recipients of hospitality were evaluated in terms of their worthiness and goodness. As Lactantius notes, for Cicero, the "houses of illustrious men should be open to illustrious guests." Lactantius, however, rejected notions of hospitality that thought in terms of the worthiness and goodness of guests, in favor of thinking of the guest's need. He says, "The house of a just man ought not to be open to the illustrious, but to the lowly and abject. For the illustrious and powerful men cannot be in want of anything." Lactantius demonstrates the distinctive character of Christian hospitality as welcoming the vulnerable with no concern for advantage or ambition. Rather, he makes clear that Christian hospitality was about justice, not mutual advantage. He says, "But in what does the nature of justice consist than in our affording to strangers through kindness that which we render to our relatives through affection."

St. John Chrysostom echoes this theme of offering hospitality not based on the recipients' ability to return the favor, but rather precisely to those who cannot repay us. He writes, "Why did God command us to call to our suppers and our feasts the lame,

and the maimed, and those who cannot repay us? Because these are most of all properly called good deeds which are done for God's sake. Whereas if you entertain some great and distinguished person, it is not such pure mercy, because some credit many times is assigned to yourself also, both by vain-glory, and by return of the favor, and by your rising in many people's estimation on account of your guest." In addition to the claim that hospitality ought to be shown to people who cannot repay us, Chrysostom also provides an awareness that in offering hospitality to people in need, one is also welcoming Christ. He says, "Christ goes about 'naked and a stranger.' It is only shelter He wants . . . Let our house be Christ's general receiving place. Let us demand of [strangers] as reward, not money, but that they make our house the receiving place for Christ." In Christian hospitality, in welcoming the vulnerable stranger one is welcoming Christ.

St Benedict, the father of western monasticism, made hospitality to strangers a central feature of monastic practice. The *Rule of Benedict* requires that monks provide hospitality to clerics, pilgrims, and the poor because of Christ's identification with the stranger in Matthew 25:35. As Benedict writes, "all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Monasteries and their hospices for pilgrims became one of the central institutions where hospitality remained in practice in medieval western society.

The practice of hospitality was central to Christian identity in the early church. The early church founded several institutions whose mission focused on hospitality. By the early fifth century, hospices, hospitals, alms-houses, orphanages, and old-age homes were founded and run by Christians. The hallmark of Christian hospitality was the extension of welcome to include the vulnerable and the stranger, those who precisely could not repay their hosts. By offering hospitality to the lowly and abject, the early church was recognizing the dignity and common humanity of these guests. Welcome, compassion, and equal treatment were characteristic of hospitality in the early church. And, most profoundly, the early church recognized that in welcoming the stranger, we are also welcoming Christ.

4 - Moral issues in migration and immigration

As we consider what is and what ought to be in our nation's policies on migration and immigration, we must apply our scriptural knowledge, our Christian tradition, and our God-given reason to the complexities that face us. We, your bishops, suggest the following principles to guide those considerations:

First, we need to create a clearer and more just system for immigrants to achieve permanent residency and eventual citizenship. People who have come here to overcome poverty, to escape war, or to fulfill economic demands in this country should be able to become permanent members of our society. Many immigrant families have integrated into our communities and have no plan or desire to return to their country of origin. We need their contributions, and we should welcome their presence and receive them as fellow citizens.

While a large percentage of unauthorized immigrants should be extended legal status, two groups deserve special consideration. First, persons who were brought to the United States as children who, for all intents and purposes, are Americans should

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be granted lawful permanent residence and ultimately citizenship. In addition, these children should be afforded every level of education from which they can benefit, including higher education. In-state residents should be granted in-state tuition at state universities, without reference to their legal status. Federal financial aid and grants should also be available to them. To deny a child an education is to deny our society that child's gifts and potential.

Second, low-wage laborers who work year after year harvesting and preparing our food, sewing our clothes, caring for our children and elderly, and meeting our other essential needs should be given legal recognition and protection. In addition, the rights of native and foreign workers should be defended, and on an equal basis without reference to legal status. Native workers should not have to fear that their income will be undercut by the exploitation of immigrant labor. Immigrant workers should not be exploited or penalized when they contribute to the economy through their work and their taxes. Upturns and downturns alike require employment of both native workers and immigrant workers.

The reform of our immigration system should also include eliminating backlogs and barriers which continue to separate families. The family continues to be the basic unit of society, and the stability of families affects the stability of our society. Parents should be present and available to their children, not just sending them money from afar, but perhaps not seeing them for years or even decades. Spouses should not experience years-long absences from each another.

Finally, we should promote not only legal status for immigrants, but the long-term success and incorporation of these immigrants into our nation's life. This will require an extensive and coordinated immigrant integration project, involving our nation's faith communities; federal state, and local government; civil society; business and labor leaders; and others. The goal should be to allow our immigrant sisters and brothers to become fully participating and contributing members of our society.

Sisters and brothers, we urge you to consider, discuss, study, and pray over this pastoral letter, and to inform yourself in other appropriate ways about these issues, that we may all work together for a just and holy solution to the issues of migration and immigration that face our nation and our world.

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