

The Church and the Migrant

By Father Anthony McGuire

In the entrance to the crypt of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. stands a statue of the Holy Family fleeing as refugees to Egypt. Joseph is sleeping; Mary is resting against a pillar with the infant Jesus in her arms. All they have is each other and their trust in God. This representation of the Flight to Egypt, which appears in Matthew's Gospel, is a good reminder to us disciples of Jesus about the attitude we should have toward refugees and immigrants. Jesus, Mary and Joseph shared in that human trauma of living on the edge of survival, their hope for living a secure family life threatened by cruel edicts from on high. All they had was themselves and their trust in God.

The first response of the disciple of Jesus to the plight of the refugee and immigrant is compassion. On December 6, 1999, in his World Day for Migrants and Refugees address, Pope John Paul II emphasized this attitude as he surveyed the great refugee crisis throughout the world: "The appearance in every society of the world of the figure of the exile, the refugee, the deported, the illegal immigrant, the migrant, street people, confers on the Jubilee a very concrete significance, which for believers becomes a call to a change of mentality and life.

"For us in the United States, this attitude of compassion should also lead to a sense of solidarity, since most of us come from families of immigrants and, in many of our extended families, can even count people who snuck into the country. Those basic attitudes of compassion and solidarity are essential starting points; however, the issues of refugees and immigrants in the world today are complex. Sorting through them at times demands solomonic wisdom.

The Church's position is played out between two goal posts: the right of a country to defend its borders and the right of an individual to emigrate if the country of origin does not afford the conditions necessary to lead a fully human life. At a recent conference of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., Msgr. William Fay, assistant secretary general of the U. S. Bishops' Conference, summed up the Church's position. He quotes from Pope John XXIII's encyclical, "Peace on Earth" ("*Pacem in Terris*"), and from the Congregation of Bishops' Instruction on the Pastoral Care of People Who Migrate (Aug. 22, 1969).

"Where a state which suffers from poverty combined with great population cannot supply such use of goods to its inhabitants, or where the state places conditions which offend human dignity, people possess a right to emigrate, to

select a new home in foreign lands and to seek conditions of life worthy of man.

The right to emigrate, in other words, applies to all who hope "more fittingly [to] provide a future" for themselves or their family. It embraces, then, not only the traditional political refugees like the Kosovars, but also those fleeing extreme poverty and natural disaster, like the victims of Hurricane Mitch. Furthermore, this right pertains "to whole families," and the right of families "to live together" must be safeguarded in this context.

This right to emigrate necessitates a corresponding duty on the part of receiving states "to accept such immigrants and — so far as the good of their own community, rightly understood, permits — to further the aims of those who may wish to become members of a new society." Put differently, sovereign states unjustly deny fundamental human rights if they "block or impede emigration or immigration, except where grave requirements of the common good, considered objectively, demand it." In fact, Catholic social teaching views "the recognition, respect, safeguarding and promotion of the rights of the human person" as the end of all political authority."

In recent years in the United States the game plan has been to accent the right to defend borders to the detriment of the right to emigrate. The policy of "prevention through deterrence" for immigrants at the Mexican border has resulted in the demonization of undocumented workers in the national consciousness. The Immigration and Naturalisation Service budget for border enforcement efforts in 1993 was \$1.5 billion. It grew to \$3.1 billion in 1997 and for FY 2000, \$4 billion. The result has been increased risk of life for migrants who desperately cross in remote mountainous and desert terrain. While apprehensions have remained constant at approximately 475,000 a year, in 1994 there was only one death from heat stroke. In 1998, 112 migrants died from heat stroke.

These sad statistics are a wake up call to alert our country to the need for placing more emphasis on the human dignity and human rights of immigrants at our border. As long as natural disasters, slow job growth and a widening wage gap push people to leave their homes to support their families migration, lawfully or unlawfully, will occur. This reality forces us to ask, at what point is the cost to human life, human dignity and human rights too great to continue the current policy of "prevention through deterrence"?

The U.S. Catholic Conference is working to raise awareness about border issues and other immigrant concerns. One encouraging sign is the growing support for the "AFIX '96" movement, in which the Conference participates

with other immigration groups, which is designed to ameliorate the destructive effects of the Illegal Immigration Reform And Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. Several bishops from the U.S. Bishops' Conference have testified before Congress to the human rights violations in that legislation, namely, lack of due process in criminal proceedings, unnecessary detention, retroactivity of the law, and expedited removal of asylum seekers without court review.

But much remains to do to dispel the myth that workers from Mexico and Central America are a negative influence on the American economy or way of life. Much more needs to be done to develop cross-border solidarity among labour unions, environmental agencies, government and voluntary agencies and pastoral workers. This is the major theme which came out of the Synod of America - that we need to see each other in this vast hemisphere as brothers and sisters living and working in solidarity.

As Pope John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation, "The Church in America" at the end of that synod: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40; cf. 25:45). The awareness of communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters, for its part the fruit of conversion, leads to the service of our neighbours in all their needs, material and spiritual, since the face of Christ shines forth in every human being. Solidarity is thus the fruit of the communion, which is grounded in the mystery of the triune God, and in the Son of God who took flesh and died for all. It is expressed in Christian life, which seeks the good of others, especially of those most in need.

For the particular churches of the American continent, this is the source of a commitment to reciprocal solidarity and the sharing of the spiritual gifts and material goods with which God has blessed them, fostering in individuals a readiness to work where they are needed. Taking the Gospel as its starting point, a culture of solidarity needs to be promoted, capable of inspiring timely initiatives in support of the poor and the outcast, especially refugees forced to leave their villages and lands in order to flee violence. The Church in America must encourage the international agencies of the continent to establish an economic order dominated not only by the profit motive but also by the pursuit of the common good of nations and of the international community, the equitable distribution of goods and the integral development of peoples.