

# **Immigration and our Common Dignity**

A Pastoral Reflection by Bishop Paul S. Loverde

As shepherd of a diocesan church increasingly gifted with and renewed by the presence of so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who come from other lands and cultures, I was pleased to attend a recent conference devoted to the Church's teaching on immigration. Sponsored by the diocesan Peace and Justice Commission, the conference featured talks, testimonials and dialogue. Reflecting on the day's events, I wish to share with you, the members of the Diocese of Arlington, the following thoughts on our Savior's command to "welcome the stranger."

As the son of an immigrant, I am keenly aware of the importance of our society's debate on immigration. My father, Paul Loverde, emigrated from Sicily to this country as an 18-year old just after the First World War. After a brief stay in Buffalo, he took a textile job at a factory in New York, and later in Connecticut. He then met my mother, who worked full-time also at a textile factory. They assisted, as best they could, Dad's family in Sicily.

If my father were alive today, I wonder what he would think of the climate surrounding much of the current immigration debate. He might recall the challenges he faced fresh off the boat as an Italian teenager, alone in this country, seeking a better life, and carrying nothing but a suitcase. He might reminisce about his first parish home, where Italian immigrants were welcomed, but in keeping with the general tenor of that era, given the church basement for their Masses in Latin and Italian.

Today, some eighty years later, do immigrants find in our communities and our churches an authentic "culture of welcome"<sup>1</sup> founded on Jesus' command to "welcome the stranger"? Or are they, so to speak, still shown to the church basement?

The Book of Proverbs urges us, "Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set" (22:28). The Hebrew word for "landmark" here connotes "guide" or "touchstone." These were literally stone markers set throughout the wilderness to guide the way of the Israelites. In an analogous way, the Lord instituted "touchstones" for His Chosen People to guide them in their relationship with Him – these included the Torah (or the Law), and the Sabbath.

I offer three touchstones, rooted in the teachings of the Church on social justice, for our reflection on immigration. In Virginia, as elsewhere, Congress' failure over the last few years to enact a comprehensive reform of a broken immigration system has spawned divergent reactions among legislators and local governments.

## **I. Dignity of the Human Person**

To our first touchstone: Do our basic attitudes, our current debate on the immigration issue and any proposed legislation—do these respect the human dignity of

all persons? The measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the dignity of the human person. Every person, created in the image and likeness of God, possesses an intrinsic dignity. This conviction of a person's fundamental worth stands at the heart of the Church's stands on abortion, cloning, the institution of marriage, and many other issues, including immigration reform. Long before Jesus enjoined us to "welcome the stranger" and care for the least of these, the Lord instructed His Chosen People in the Hebrew Scriptures to respect and honor the newcomer.

To be sure, nations have the right, and even the grave responsibility, to secure their borders, and the rule of law must be respected. But we must also measure every law and every policy by whether it promotes or undermines human dignity. When a prosperous nation's immigration system fails to provide opportunities for those trapped in poverty in other countries to extricate themselves and their families from unlivable situations, we must ask whether such a system is truly putting human dignity first. Immigration policies should be fairer, more humane and aimed toward the family. We must go beyond an enforcement-only approach by examining and addressing the root causes of migration.

## **II. Family**

Secondly: Do our basic attitudes, our current debate on the immigration issue and any proposed legislation—do these respect the family, the fundamental building block of our society? The importance of the family must be held very much in mind. Pope Benedict XVI named "the migrant family" as the theme of this year's World Day of Migrants and Refugees, writing, "[The Church] intends to underline further the commitment of the Church not only in favor of the individual migrant, but also of his family, which is a place and resource of the culture of life and a factor for the integration of values."<sup>2</sup> Families should be together whenever possible. A separated family is a weakened family, and by extension, a weakened society. National immigration policies which require U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents to wait many years for a visa in order to be reunited with their loved ones work against the family.

## **III. Pastoral Care**

Thirdly, and finally, and this I offer in a special way to our clergy: Are we doing everything we can to meet the spiritual aspirations of our immigrant Catholic brothers and sisters?

Today, debates about immigration appear to center on those who come to the United States from Mexico and Central and South America. Permit me, therefore, to speak more directly about our Latino brothers and sisters. In our diocese today, approximately one in three Catholics is Latino. The majority of our Latino brothers and sisters do not reside in the shadows; they are here legally—whether as citizens, permanent residents, or in Temporary Protected Status (TPS). But as Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants

and Itinerant Peoples, recently said, “[T]here are immigrants in an irregular situation, who, however, independently of their legal status, have inalienable human dignity.”<sup>3</sup>

Our churches are open to our Latino brothers and sisters. I recall the words of John Paul II, who reminded us that “Membership in the Catholic community is not determined by nationality, or by social or ethnic origin, but essentially by faith in Jesus Christ and Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>4</sup> Half of our 68 parishes—spanning 21 counties throughout the northern tier of Virginia—offer Masses in Spanish. To cite just one of many other facets of ministry, over forty of our parishes reach out to Latino youth in a special way through youth programs. Hogar Hispano, Catholic Charities’ immigration services of the Diocese of Arlington, assisted over 350 clients with Temporary Protected Status last year alone. Many of our parishes reach out in other practical ways – with ESL classes, medical assistance, athletic organizations, and citizenship classes. The Spanish Apostolate, our Offices of Multicultural Ministries, of Migration and Refugee Services, of Catholic Charities, of Respect Life, of Family Life, and also the Virginia Catholic Conference, together with our parishes, encounter on a daily basis the sobering realities of the current broken system, from separated families to those in need of basic human care. But there is always more we can do, and governmental programs should be designed to help, not hinder, these efforts.

### **Conclusion:**

Today many men and women, many of them in their teens and twenties as my father was in 1920, arrive to our communities with nothing but a suitcase. They work long hours, at times encounter misunderstanding and even hostility in their local neighborhoods and communities, and experience the loneliness which comes from missing family far away. Whatever their status, we can agree on this: they possess a fundamental dignity, and the Church meets them with open doors.

My father was not alone when he came to this country. He and my mother found in the Church a touchstone: The Church was there for them, just as I pray that our sixty-eight parishes and six missions in this diocese are open to the newcomers of today. After all, as members of the Church, we are called to be “the living presence of Christ in the world.” He is the Good Shepherd, and the understanding and compassion which He freely gives us must, in turn, mark the ways we treat our immigrant brothers and sisters.

Security and the rule of law are essential, but it is also essential that immigration policies reflect the principle that we are all brothers and sisters in God’s one human family. Therefore, I join my brother bishops in calling for immigration policies that are more generous, more humane, and more aimed toward the family.

Blessed John XXIII urged the Second Vatican Council Fathers to examine the “signs of the times” in the light of the Gospel. As Pope Benedict XVI recently said, “One of the recognizable signs of the times today is undoubtedly migration.”<sup>5</sup> How we treat the immigrant is a sign of our own deepest convictions about human dignity, the family, and the pastoral care of all of God’s children. It is my prayer and hope that, as

Catholics, we will ever more strengthen these convictions, that our diocese may be more and more marked by a “culture of welcome.”

*October, 2007*

*If you wish to receive regular e-mail alerts and updates on legislation considered by the Virginia General Assembly and the U.S. Congress on immigration reform and other matters related to human dignity, please visit the Virginia Catholic Conference's website ([www.vacatholic.org](http://www.vacatholic.org)), click JOIN THE NETWORK!, and complete the short form provided. Further information on the Catholic Church's teaching on immigration can be found at [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org)*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Address by Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, September, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks, Global Forum on Migration, Brussels, Belgium, July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2006.