Why Immigrants Come

Paul Apostolidis

In May 2006, immigrants and their allies staged historic work stoppages and marches for justice across the United States and abroad. That day, I took the Whitman College students in my course on “Politics and Religion” to the main park in Walla Walla, Washington, where our college is located. As Mexican American teenagers shouted hip-hop riffs into a microphone, families spread out a pot-luck lunch, and Community College students held break-out sessions on immigration reform, my students and I discussed contemporary Christian perspectives on immigration. We looked closely at two documents: the 2003 joint statement on migration by the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops, “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” and a recent speech by Dr. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention.

While the bishops’ letter included lengthy segments on distressing social conditions in Latin America, Land seemed uninterested in the question of why immigrants make the long, arduous, trek to the United States. Land’s focus was all on “us”: our security, our rights, our laws, our jobs. These concerns are not to be lightly dismissed. But what about the lives of immigrants—their rights, their families’ needs, their capacities and hopes for work, their languages and cultures? How does our perspective on justice change and grow when we try to understand what immigration is all about by listening to the voices of immigrants themselves?

Several years ago, I conducted a series of interviews with migrant Mexican, Salvadorian, and Guatemalan food-processing workers in the U.S. West who had made extraordinary efforts to revitalize their unions and to challenge hazardous conditions in their workplaces. I wanted to find out why they relocated to the U.S. How might knowing more about their experiences as immigrants help explain why they had so boldly taken action in the face of mammoth corporations like Tyson Foods and Cargill? And how could attending to their stories help shift the conversation about immigration from a preoccupation with how or whether immigrants can assimilate to our national culture toward appreciating how immigrants can help radically transform our undemocratic and unequal society?

Most of the workers I talked to came from genuinely poor families in Mexico: families who missed out on the general economic uplift Mexico experienced during its postwar expansion; families who, when economic catastrophe hit in the early 1980s, were forced to shut down their small businesses and earn wages in large garment factories and tourist hotels. These families watched the local populations in their rural villages steadily drain away as agricultural
production dwindled, even before NAFTA intensified the corporate expropriation of farm land. And certainly, these immigrant workers were looking to gain the advantages they thought coming to the U.S. would enable them to have—access to better educational opportunities for their children, as well as higher incomes and wider consumer options for themselves.

The migration stories of these immigrant worker-activists also revealed, however, that for these individuals, deciding to immigrate was above all a matter of putting into practice their deep-seated commitments to personal and interpersonal ethics. Immigration provided a series of action-contexts where, to borrow terms from labor historian Vicki Ruiz, these individuals were not merely “victims of poverty” but also showed “agency” as they “made choices for themselves and for their families.”

Thus, immigration became a crucible of ethical identity, for they made these choices on the basis of their core values of self-reliance and family responsibility. Once they had become established in the U.S., these ethical commitments to oneself and one’s own blossomed into more inclusive forms of regard for, and joint action with, others.

Lucio and Teresa Moreno were leading activists in the 1995-2005 workers’ movement at Tyson’s plant in Pasco, Washington. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, Lucio first came to the U.S. in the 1980s, after having traveled through Mexico looking for work to support his young family. “I don’t live for free, I tell you,” said Lucio. “I pay with my sweat: to eat, to live. If I want to live well, I have to work harder. And that’s what I’m doing…. No one is giving me anything. I’m the one who’s earning it.”

Self-reliance is at the center of Moreno’s vision of what it means to live an ethical life. It is what motivated him to inspire fellow immigrant workers to unite, gathering mutual strength from their individual efforts to fight back against abusive supervisors at Tyson. He also played a key role in mustering the group solidarity that enabled the workers to carry out a major strike and to democratize the union so that it was effectively led by the immigrant rank and file. In short, Lucio Moreno came to the U.S. because he believed strongly in taking care of himself, and this same desire to prove his self-sufficiency led him to join others in an exemplary struggle for workplace democracy and human rights.

Lucio’s wife, Teresa, tells a different story, but one that once again shows the remarkable ethical agency of immigrants. After Lucio left and the family’s small store in Mérida, Yucatán, folded, Teresa moved to Cancún, leaving behind the comadre who had helped take care of her kids. She then spent two hard years cleaning in the hotels and worrying about her children, who now had to take care of themselves for most of the day. Teresa made up her mind to cross the border because she wanted to be a good mother: so she could find a work situation that would let her adequately care for her children, “so they could be with their dad,” and “so that they could get an education.”

When Teresa later got involved in organizing people to change the brutal conditions at Tyson, she used family life as a model for interpreting the workers’ democratic slogan, “¡Nosotros somos la unión!” [We are the union!] “It’s like a home. I could come home and just stay there sitting around all the time, like I have nothing to do. Let’s say my children are there. And just stay there sitting around, like a home. I could come home and worry about my children, so I could get up to help.” By immigrating to the United States, Teresa Moreno acted on her dedication to her family, and that dedication eventually bore additional fruit by helping her define a distinctive, “familial” approach to grassroots democracy where collective empowerment and mutual support grow out of individual responsibility.

In the 1980s when Lucio and Teresa Moreno made their separate but entwined treks north of the Rio Grande and into Washington State, another national discussion on immigration reform was continued on page 9
Although immigration is a complex issue, it seems clear that the current system being used in the United States is broken. In examining the issues surrounding immigration policies, it is essential to keep in mind that for us, as Catholics, immigration is fundamentally a moral issue.

Throughout history, people have always been on the move, traveling from one land to the next. The Bible contains many accounts of people migrating. In the Old Testament, the journey of Moses and his people out of Egypt is one of the most memorable. And in the New Testament, the child Jesus and the Holy Family were refugees fleeing the terror of Herod to a new land of unknowns. As Jesus grew older and began His public ministry, He would travel from place to place, “with nowhere to lay His head…” (Matthew 8:20).

In addition to the numerous stories of migration in the Bible, there are also many Scriptural passages that call us to look at immigration in a moral light, with open hearts and minds. The Old Testament tells us, “Do not mistreat the stranger who resides in your land. The stranger who lives among you must be treated like one of your own—for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:32-34). In the New Testament we are told, “For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me. I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:35-40).

Church teachings further emphasize that immigration is a moral issue. In the first encyclical, *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor)*, Pope Leo XIII established that persons have a right to work to survive and to support their families. Pope Pius XII, in the apostolic constitution, *Exsul Familia (On the Spiritual Care of the Migrant)*, reaffirms that migrants have a right to a life with dignity, and therefore a right to migrate toward that end: “Then, according to the teachings of *Rerum Novarum*, the right of the family to a life worthy of human dignity is recognized. When this happens, migration attains its natural scope…”

In the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*, Pope John XXIII clearly articulates the right to migrate: “Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of their country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate and take up residence elsewhere.” Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this same teaching in an address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants in 1985: “When there are just reasons in favor of it, [every person] must be permitted to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that [one] is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive [one] of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society; the common, world-wide fellowship of [all people].”

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken the principles from Church teachings and applied them to the immigration reality in the United States. In January, 2003, the U.S. bishops issued the pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*. In this document, the U.S. bishops articulated five principles that govern how the Church responds to public policy proposals relating to immigration. [These five principles are outlined on the following page].
Using these important principles as guidelines, the bishops analyzed the current immigration system in this country, acknowledging that it is badly in need of reform and that a comprehensive approach to fixing it is required. The bishops offer a set of recommendations for changing U.S. laws and policies to reflect the principles contained in Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching and to bring about a more humane and just immigration system in the United States.

The bishops’ call for reform includes the following elements:

- Global anti-poverty efforts
- Expanded opportunities to reunify families
- Temporary worker program
- Broad-based earned legalization of undocumented persons already living in the United States
- Restoration of due process

Acting on the evident need for a humane, moral immigration reform, and using Catholic Social Teaching as a basis, the bishops formed the campaign, *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope*, in May of 2005. The purpose of this campaign is to begin the process of changing hearts and minds and to educate people about the myths surrounding immigration. The goals are to encourage all people to open our arms and welcome the stranger, and to reach out to immigrants and bring them into our communities. As Cardinal McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, said on March 1st of 2006, “Today, many of our brothers and sisters find themselves in their own desert—sometimes literally. They risk their lives to support their families, and they bring to our nation a strong work ethic, family values, and a deep spirituality. It is my prayer that we do not abandon them, that we embrace their many gifts, and that, in the very near future, their suffering will end.”

**Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.**
Human Trafficking: Immigration and Exploitation Intersect

Anne Ko and Carrie Schonwald

Did you know that your manicurist, the cashier at the corner store, or the busboy at your favorite restaurant may be victims of human trafficking?1

Human trafficking is the illegal trade of human beings—through abduction, the use or threat of force, deception, fraud or “sale” for the purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labor. They come from many countries and educational backgrounds. Their traffickers may be wealthy mafia kings or respectable couples living in the suburbs, holding a low-paid nanny against her will.

The sad truth is that 21% (1.1 billion people) of the global population lives on less than $1 a day, in countries rife with sociopolitical problems and lacking in economic opportunity.2 It is precisely this desperation and lack of opportunity upon which traffickers prey.

In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act to prevent trafficking, protect victims and prosecute traffickers. The services and laws springing from this act were a beginning, but much more is needed.

People of conscience need to ask some probing questions. Would it not be more economic to have fiscal policies toward the developing world that do not create an environment where people need to leave their homes for survival? Would it not be more ethical to focus our federal funds on preventing traffickers from preying on the vulnerable, rather than treating immigrants as terrorists?

Trafficing is an extraordinarily complex problem. Individually, it is one person using power to exploit another for financial gain. Systemically, it is a multifaceted, global issue based on the intersection between crime, economics, migration, labor, health and socio-cultural practices. Developing countries benefit from the cheap labor of poorer countries, while enforcing economic policies that trap these countries into crushing debt.

When we add to these economic factors the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of the United States government, desperation to come to the U.S. by any means becomes commonplace. Until the poor around the planet all have access to jobs, healthcare and political freedom, there will be mass global migration.

Are you a nation of immigrants? After all, there is adequate law enforcement to prevent criminals from finding destination countries. Would it not be more ethical to focus our federal funds on preventing traffickers from preying on the vulnerable, rather than treating immigrants as terrorists?

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Every year, between 18,000 and 20,000 foreign nationals are trafficked into the U.S. and between 600,000- 800,000 people are trafficked around the world.3

1 Vital Voices Global Partnership www.vitalvoices.org
Cultural Contributions of Immigrants

Sr. Mary Ellen Robinson

hat are some of the cultural contributions of immigrants, beyond their labor and low wages? What would we Americans lose if all our immigrants and their children left us?

In Wapato, three beautiful faith communities are celebrating their 100th anniversaries. At least one of them is dying. The most common special ceremony there is a funeral. Another is bursting at the seams, with youth, talent and potential for transformative prayer and action. The difference? New immigrants.

In Advent, our parish was accustomed to a quiet, muted lavender and green atmosphere. When the Mexican community decorated the church for the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, we saw that our idea of Advent is not universal. Others hold very different mental and emotional maps of December. New immigrants bring ideas of beauty and celebration that both refresh and challenge.

Often, after a bilingual Mass, Anglos complain about how long it was, and Latinos wonder why it was so short! When it comes to time, and what's important, family and community celebrations trump almost every other value for many Mexicans. Celebration and communication are processes, and they expect to invest time and money accordingly.

I cannot count the assumptions I've had to examine, thanks to immigrant friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. The incomprehensibility of my living alone, my wealth, the relative value of things and people in parish life, that not talking at meals and slurping if you enjoy the soup are preferred behavior in some parts of the world, that Catholics from most of Latin America live a deep and deeply different Catholicism than the one I grew up in.

So many judgments our minds have made are cultural, not universally human. We can cling or change, open or close. But thanks to our immigrant teachers, we know we have choices.

New immigrants bring cultural gifts that both transcend and lie beneath the externals of music, food, clothing, art, etc. They bring different points of view, new life, youth, energy, experience with risk. Even before we meet the mysterious and particular genius of one immigrant or group of immigrants, just the fact that they are new and other brings variety, which functions as life-giving oxygen in our American bloodstream.

“Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America.
Then I discovered that the immigrants were America.”

—Oscar Handlin, Professor Emeritus of American History, Harvard University

In 1907, all three congregations were formed from newly arriving families, mostly from northern European roots. The growing Church is still full of newly arriving families. The dying congregation reflects the dilemma almost all of Europe faces: let in new blood, or die. One congregation in Wapato decided a few years ago that they would rather die than change. And so it was. Their church stands empty and boarded up, an eyesore in the community.
Reinvoking the Ancient Law of Sanctuary

Rev. John Fife

On March 24th, 1982, Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson publicly declared the church a “Sanctuary” for refugees fleeing the death squads and wars in Central America. A movement began in North America that resulted in 567 Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish congregations protecting refugees in their sanctuaries. While we do not know how many lives were saved, we do know that the Sanctuary Movement forced the U.S. government to stop deportations of refugees to El Salvador and Guatemala, to grant work permits to refugees from these countries, and to reform the political asylum policy. All of this was not without some risk to those congregations and their leadership. Social justice and reform have never been achieved without risk and sacrifice.

After the peace accords were signed in Central America in 1992, we held a joyful worship celebration and declared that the Sanctuary Movement had ended. That decision may have been premature. There are now signs all around us that in order to be faithful and prophetic word to the Church, we must continue to provide ministry of compassion and humanity to undocumented workers.

In the midst of this climate of fear, bigotry, and repression, Cardinal Mahony of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has spoken a clear and prophetic word to the Church, encouraging us that to be faithful to Scripture and Church teaching, we must continue to provide ministries of compassion and humanitarian aid to migrants. Father Dan Groody of the University of Notre Dame has taught that the Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 is an exact description of the migrant in North America today.

“I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, an alien, in prison... And as you did it unto the least of these... You did it unto Me.”

Back at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, we have been uniting with churches and synagogues in the borderlands to save the lives of migrants in the desert. Volunteers provide water stations; doctors and nurses drive ranch roads in jeeps searching for migrants in distress; students hike migrant trails with backpacks filled with food, water, and medical aid. A center for day laborers has been established on church property so that workers can have a safe place to gather.

And we continue to ask the question, “Is the tradition of the church as sanctuary appropriate for the suffering of the migrant in our midst?” Perhaps the Spirit is on the move again, as the Rev. David Chevrier proclaimed 25 years ago. “This is the time and we are the people to reinvoke the ancient law of sanctuary... to claim our sacred right to invoke the name of God—to push back all the powers of violation and violence in the name of the Spirit to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance. We are the people to tell Caesar, ‘No trespassing, for the ground upon which you walk is holy.’”

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The following three stories illustrate common experiences faced by immigrants to the U.S. The names and details of each story have been altered to protect privacy.

**A Family Divided**

*Terra Nevitt*

Mr. Sarbaz made his first trip to the United States in 1957 after completing the military academy in Afghanistan—he had been selected to go to the U.S. for a year of training. During the 1980s, he fought against communism and for the freedom of his country. But when civil war took hold of his country, he fled to Pakistan with his family.

In Pakistan, the Sarbaz family made a refugee camp their home—except for one son and his wife, who were missing in Afghanistan. Conditions in the camp were difficult and Mrs. Sarbaz died there. In 1992 Mr. Sarbaz was granted refugee status, along with his three youngest children. The rest of the family was not allowed to travel with him. In 1993, Mr. Sarbaz entered the U.S. with his youngest son, leaving his two young daughters behind to care for his grandson, Zalmay, whose parents were still missing.

Mr. Sarbaz worked fervently to reunite his family, contacting refugee groups and members of Congress. In 1998, he was able to bring Zalmay and his two youngest daughters to the U.S. as refugees. To date, Mr. Sarbaz, who is now a U.S. citizen, has been unable to help his adult children acquire refugee status. His remaining option is to file a petition to bring them as immigrants. He is disheartened by his knowledge that it can take eight years for a U.S. citizen to bring a married child into the country.

Mr. Sarbaz and his family are doing well. His children finished high school and are now married, with their own families. Zalmay is attending community college classes as a high school student and dreams of being a lawyer. But Mr. Sarbaz worries every day for the safety of those left behind. He often wakes at midnight to amble around the yard, wondering what might happen to them in the future.

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**The Struggles of the Undocumented**

*Jean Anton*

Guadalupe carries the burden of being an undocumented person wherever she goes. Looking for work was a struggle, as she was repeatedly told, “You cannot apply for this job, not unless you have papers.” She confided in a friend, “I feel so miserable and desperate and sad, because everyone needs work.”

Finally, Guadalupe was able to find a low-paying job cleaning tables in the food court of one of the local malls. But she soon discovered that her status made her vulnerable. “I have to put up with the humiliation of being denied any benefits, never having a raise or a vacation, no paid holidays, working long hours without overtime pay.” Her best friend, also undocumented, is employed as a maid at one of the downtown hotels and, even after several years on the job, is still making minimum wage.

Without benefits from her job, Guadalupe has no medical or dental insurance for herself or her children. When her 4-year-old daughter had a painful toothache, she took her to a dental clinic at 6:30 in the morning, waiting in line for an hour before the doors opened, only to discover she had to sign up and wait another 2 hours. Eventually, she was told that the clinic could only serve 2 patients that day, and she would have to return again later in the week.

Guadalupe has dreams that her children will get more schooling than she had in Mexico, but she knows that their undocumented status will be a barrier to higher education. She is deeply saddened as she faces broken dreams of a better future for them.

The constant fear of deportation, the vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment, reluctance to purchase a house, never feeling free, safe, part of society...these are the experiences Guadalupe lives on a daily basis. “It is so hard to get here,” she says, “I owe so much money to the smugglers who brought us across. We wouldn’t come if we didn’t have to.”
Land of Dreams

Kari Ansari

I came to this mid-western city in early 2001 when my husband won the green card lottery. Since then he has been driving a taxi. He wanted a career in marketing; my husband is well educated, but hasn’t been hired. After sending out dozens of resumes, he has landed only one interview. It seems if your name is Mohammed and you have a foreign degree, it’s difficult to find professional positions. My husband will not change his beloved name, even if he must drive a cab for the rest of his life.

As a modestly dressed Muslim woman, I also have had a hard time finding work. I have interviewed for executive assistant positions, for which I am well-qualified, but when I appear in my “hijab” (head scarf), the interviews quickly end. One man said, “I’d like to hire you, but you’ll have to take that thing off your head; you’ll scare my clients.” I work in a Muslim-owned shop for minimum wage so I can wear my hijab.

Many times when I turn on the television or radio, I hear the words “Islamic terrorist” and I wonder, do Americans think that all Muslims are terrorists? Maybe it’s my imagination, but I’m beginning to feel as though everyone is suspicious of me, and it has begun to change the way I feel about myself.

Often I think I’d like to go back to my country, but after struggling for five years, it’s too late. We only want to work hard and settle down.

I grew up believing that America was a land of dreams, but at times it feels like a nightmare. My peaceful faith had nothing to do with 9/11; however, because of 9/11, I think America wants nothing to do with me. ~

Kari Ansari is the Editor-in-Chief of America’s Muslim Family Magazine, and lives with her husband and children in Herndon, VA. Website: www.americasmuslimfamily.com

Do Americans think that all Muslims are terrorists?

continued from page 2

underway. That debate resulted in legislation that gave immediate legal status to the Morenos and virtually all their fellow activists at Tyson in Pasco. This legalization program, however, was only temporary; since then, the numbers of undocumented immigrants have risen to even greater levels than they had reached in 1986. As the current immigration dispute rages, we can gain some moral clarity by considering what immigrants say about their own experiences and their reasons for immigrating. We should also take note of how things ultimately turned out for the immigrants who benefited from the last major legalization initiative, and be open to seeing how beyond merely “adjusting” to U.S. society, immigrants can provide hope and ethical fortitude for re-making this society as a more humane community. ~


### Top 10 Countries of Birth for Legal Immigrants: 1960 and 2005

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Parenting for Peace & Justice

The Parenting for Peace & Justice program is in its second season. Consider starting the program in your church or community with IPJC’s support. The detailed five session program includes:

1st—Peace in the Family
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3rd—Families that Care for the Environment
4th—Nurturing Respect for Diversity
5th—Living in a Global World

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IPJC hosted three screenings in early October with discussion, and sponsored showings in multiple states. Learn more about what you can do to affect global warming at www.climatecrisis.org/takeaction

Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment (NWCRI) Annual Report

Our 2006 NWCRI Annual Report is now available at http://www.ipjc.org/programs/NWCRIReport2006.pdf. We encourage you to read the report and consider how you can partner with us by praying for the justice issues we address, writing corporations about your concerns, and being a responsible consumer. If you have investments, monitor them; talk with your manager about your values; vote your proxies.

United Way

Designate the Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center with United Way. Please consider writing us in on your pledge. This is one more important way for us to receive support for doing the work of peace and justice that is so needed in our world.

Justice Retreat

Linda Haydock, SNJM facilitated a three day retreat at St. Aloysius Parish, Spokane in September on:

• Scripture
• Social Justice
• Contemplation
• Ignatian Spirituality
• A Faith that Does Justice

Hope Calendar

Make your holiday gift list and help spread the story of the Church of Mary Magdalene and Mary’s Place. The 2007 Beauty & Strength: Women of Mary’s Place Speak of Homelessness & Hope calendars are now on sale for $10. Please call if you would like to purchase or help distribute: 206.621.8474
Internationally known theologian, storyteller and lecturer. Author of over 25 books, including *Send My Roots Rain: A Spirituality of Justice and Mercy*; and *On Your Mark: Reading Mark in the Shadow of the Cross*. Megan weaves scripture, story, poetry and image together in a dramatic way that invites transformation and brings meaning and hope to our world.

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- Give yourself a morning of reflection before Thanksgiving

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Pre-Registration $10—Complete and return this form before November 1st to: IPJC, 1216 NE 65th St, Seattle, WA 98115.

Name(s): __________________________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________City/State/Zip: __________________________

Phone: _____________________________ E-mail: ________________________________
Did You Know?

Overall, annual taxes paid by immigrants to all levels of governments more than offset the costs of services received, generating a net annual surplus of $25 billion to $30 billion.

—Source: www.urban.org/publications/305184.html

The largest wave of immigration to the U.S. since the early 1900s coincided with our lowest national unemployment rate and fastest economic growth.

—Source: www.justiceforimmigrants.org/myths.html

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