

Our People

An Introduction to the Topic of Immigration

House of Bishops, September 17, 2010

A few months ago I was asked to give an interview about immigration for the PBS series *Religion and Ethics*. The interviewer was very fair and quite sympathetic to the plight of undocumented people, but at one point he asked, "Well then Bishop Smith, what does the church think we ought to do with these people."

"These people," I said, "Are my people." My guess is that there are about 500 Arizona Episcopalians who are undocumented, who have their children baptized, are confirmed, and worship and participate fully in the life of our local congregations.

Moreover, they are Arizona's people, who pay far more in taxes than they use public services, who work hard, send their young people to Arizona universities where they become future leaders of our state. They are our country's people too, 12 million of them, enlisting in the army, working in our fields, our restaurants, and our homes, seeking the American dream. But most important they are God's people, who are often mistreated, victimized and terrorized by an economic system which invites them here to work at jobs others don't want at substandard wages without any benefits or protection, exploiting them under the threat of summary deportation. And just like God's people of old, they cry out for liberation from Pharaoh. The Planning Committee has devoted this day's program to issues of both immigration and of ministry in Hispanic communities. We have done so not just because immigration is the political hot topic of the day, and not just because you have come to Arizona, the epicenter of that national debate, but because this is the human rights issue of our time. It is as important to the future of our country as were previous struggles over the place in our society of women, of Native Americans, African Americans, and gay and lesbian people. But as important as this struggle is for our country, it is even more important for our church. You are going to hear a lot of statistics today. But here are just a few to keep in mind. By 2020 one third of our country's population will be Hispanic. In many states, that number will be as high as 50%. Here is another fact that may surprise you. The United States is now the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world, surpassed only by Mexico. That is, more people speak Spanish here than in Spain. Our Episcopal Church has been woefully slow to recognize this changing demographic trend. Of our 7000 congregations, we have only about 80 Hispanic parishes. We can no longer say that Hispanic ministry is something that takes place only in Southwest. Each of our United States has a significant Hispanic population, and according to Anthony Guillen, Hispanic Program Officer for our Church, nearly all of our dioceses have at least one Spanish-speaking congregation. And yet this, the fastest growing segment of our population, is still largely ignored by our diocesan structures, with little if any resources provided for it. This neglect comes in spite of the fact that according to a new study that you heard about yesterday, young Hispanic families comprise the leading audience receptive to the message of our church. The reason for this is understandable. Many immigrants from Latin America who might have been at least culturally Roman Catholic are fed up with a hierarchy which they see as repressive and out of touch with their needs. They are looking to have their spiritual needs meet elsewhere, especially in faith communities who are responsive to children and who are sensitive to their culture.

Some of you many remember Fr. Guillen's presentation to us two years ago at Kanuga in which he identified the potential the Episcopal Church has to reach people who are second and third generation Latinos. You don't even need to speak Spanish to do Hispanic ministry, but as we will find out this afternoon, you can't do it just by translating the prayer book or putting a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the sanctuary, although that might be a start. "Doing Hispanic ministry" means being aware of an entirely different constellation of spiritual assumptions which are unfamiliar to us *gringos*. It means understanding a whole new context, as Bishop Ian Douglas reminded us yesterday.

But there is a more important reason to embrace Hispanic ministry than just the potential for church growth. "Striving for justice for every human being" is at the heart of our baptismal promise. We have already had a chance the past few days to reflect theologically and biblically about this imperative. I simply want to say again how important I believe it is that when we engage with our larger culture we must always base our argument on scriptural imperatives, otherwise we are going to sound like the chardonnay-sipping liberals we are often made out to be, embracing the politically correct cause *du jour*. We must remind our congregations that:

Abraham was an illegal immigrant, as was Jesus during his exile in Egypt. A rabbi wrote recently that Jews know what it is to be undocumented. "It's a pitiable story. Abraham and Sarah lie and humiliate themselves to try to survive in a foreign nation they have not received permission to enter. It must have been agonizing. It's a story of strangers in a strange land, without protection, without connections and without a right to go about their business unmolested. It's an illegal immigrant's story.... Judaism's whole history is one of not having a country of their own, of living as non-citizens in places where they were likely to be expelled at any moment."

1. The Leviticus Holiness code is emphatic about compassionate treatment of aliens. Leviticus 19: 33-34 reads, "And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall do him or her no wrong. The stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love him or her as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Eternal, your God."
2. Jesus' ministry was to the outcasts—not only to those marginalized within his own society—women, children, the sick and the possessed, but also to those on his political border, the Samaritans. We might say his whole ministry was on *la frontera*.
3. The early church succeeded by integrating those on its margins. This is the theme we hear about in the struggle to incorporate Gentiles into what was originally a Jewish movement, recounted in the Book of Acts.
4. The missionary success of Christianity was based on integrating the Gospel into entirely new cultural contexts. Those of us who are of northern European background are here because Roman missionaries like St. Augustine of Canterbury were able to adapt his message to an indigenous pagan Anglo-Saxon culture. Gregory the Great advised Augustine to accommodate and thus conquer. This lesson has been repeated again and again through the history of the church.

So—our time today is going to be in two parts. This morning we are going to focus on the immigration crisis which will affect all of you, if it has not already.

First, we will give you a political briefing. Then you will hear from two border missionaries, one from the Diocese of Arizona (the Rev. Seth Polley); the other, his colleague in the Presbyterian-based Frontera de Cristo Mission (the Rev. Mark Adams). Those of you who had the opportunity to cross the border will have already experienced some of the heartbreaking realities they will speak about. And because it is so critically important to talk *to* people rather than talk *about* them, we have also invited an undocumented member of one of our Episcopal congregations to share her story with you. For her protection, we will refer to her simply as “Señora.”

This afternoon we will turn from immigration to the larger topic of doing ministry in an Hispanic context. We will get a cultural tutorial, and we will hear from those working in the areas of stewardship and evangelism, then conclude with a panel discussion from experts in this country and other Province IX settings.

The task before us is a difficult one, and as you engage with it, you will probably get more hate mail than ever before.

Just this morning my office received a call from a talk-show host from a network called America Betrayed, who wanted to interview me. “Why did Bishop Smith lead prayers on the border for illegals,” the interview wanted to know. “How come he isn’t having a prayer service for the 80,000 people killed by illegals?”

When my communications officer told him I was not available. He retorted, “I am an Episcopalian, and you tell Bishop Smith to tell those traitor bishops that they are going to have some real Americans to deal with.” Then he hung up.

The struggle before us will be hard, but it has always been as the *missio Dei* is lived out among the *puebla de Dios*. These people are our people. They are God’s people.