ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 8, No. 4, December 2014
Pages: 719-737

THE POLITICS OF IMMIGRATION AND A CATHOLIC COUNTERNARRATIVE
A Perspective from the United States

Kristin E. Heyer♦
Santa Clara University, USA

Abstract

Operative lenses shaping the immigration debate in the United States context can distort migrants' realities and can become surrogates for other cultural and political concerns. Economic functionalism and fear-based approaches too often de-humanize newcomers, whereas contributions from Scripture and the Catholic social tradition offer a counternarrative of civic kinship that challenges the dominant, instrumentalist frameworks.

A Historical Preamble

As attention focuses on renewed United States political debates over resolving challenges posed by the nation's undocumented immigration population, those working at the U.S.-Mexico border continue their outreach and advocacy no matter the political winds of the day or ebbs and flow in need. The Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a binational project of Jesuit Relief Services, the California and Mexican provinces of Jesuits, the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist and two bordering dioceses. During my last visit to KBI I spoke with recently deported migrants at their aid centre. One gentleman had spent twenty-six of his twenty-seven years in central California, brought there as a one-year-old by his uncle. He had worked harvesting pistachios and almonds to support his wife and four U.S. citizen

♦**Kristin E. Heyer** is Bernard J. Hanley Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University (USA). She is the author of *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Georgetown University Press, 2012) and *Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Georgetown University Press, 2006). Email: kheyer@scu.edu

children without trouble, even on the occasions he could not produce a driver's license for a routine stop. In the past two years each such stop landed him in jail — with the third resulting in deportation to Nogales. He expressed dread at starting over in a country foreign to him. Up the road at Casa Nazaret, we sat with deported women planning to reattempt the journey north in spite of the considerable dangers it posed. The women at the shelter were simply desperate to be reunited with their families in the US. One had worked at a Motel 6 in Arizona for many years supporting her two citizen children on her own after her husband left them; describing her initial reason for migrating from Mexico she said, resigned, "at home you either eat or send your children to school." The Nazareth House residents repeatedly broke into tears as they shared the pain of being separated from their children and their experiences in detention.

I have also encountered undocumented college students in California also struggling with impossible choices. I begin my recent book[1] with one who recounts how a month after her high school graduation, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents with loaded guns, bullet-proof vests, and steel-toed boots surrounded her house and nearly pounded down her front door, demanding to see her. As she tells it:

> I came out to the front yard where the head agent asked my name while pulling out handcuffs as if standing in front of some criminal. No GPA or letter of recommendation could save me then. I fell to my knees in front of the agent and began pleading with him to let me stay, telling him I was starting college in a month on a special scholarship. He said, "Fine, I will let you go, but only if you tell me where your dad is." When her mortified mother nodded "yes" to go ahead and tell them, the student revealed the information and ICE left to arrest her dad in front of his boss and coworkers and deport him. The student reflects, "I stood in complete disbelief; I had sold my own dad for an education.

Experiences wherein questions of citizenship and enforcement tactics take on flesh and blood have shaped my reflections about the Christian narrative in light of migration and globalization. Over the past 40 years, the number of international migrants worldwide more than doubled, and the United States remains the world's leading destination for immigrants. U.S. residents are increasingly confronted with newcomers. Across the United States, some reactions reflect the nation's historic openness to immigrants, and others, its deep

[1]Some of the moral arguments elaborated here I first published in *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration,* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012.

ambivalence about "outsiders." Even with bipartisan signals toward reform in the past year, legitimate concerns regarding disproportionate burdens on local services and the need to set workable limits understandably persist. At the same time, mounting threats to human dignity indicate the urgency of the system's genuine overhaul.

The path of migrants en route to the United States remains paved by suffering and death, despite unprecedented fortification and search-and-rescue operations. The death toll of migrants crossing the deserts of Arizona has steadily mounted even as crossings decline; from 1994, there have been more than 6,000 confirmed deaths — those working in the desert estimate it's 5-10 times that many. Even at 6,000 it's roughly the same number as combined U.S.-soldier fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan.[2] The number of agents stationed at the border has quintupled over the past two decades and spending on enforcement has increased 15-fold since 1986 (the last time Congress overhauled U.S. immigration policy) with the U.S. spending more today on immigration enforcement than all other enforcement activities of the federal government combined.

Despite significantly beefed up fortification, the recent increase in arrivals of unaccompanied minors and family units from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala rekindled fears of a 'border out of control.' For example, "Less than 48 hours after the nation collectively chanted "USA!" for the national soccer team in the World Cup [last] July, a much smaller group of Americans in Murrieta, California," coupled the same rally cry with chants of, "Return to sender," "Save our children from diseases," and "Bus illegal children to White House." The protesters employed the slogan to turn back busloads of Central American youth destined for a new detention centre in their community. "USA" evokes light and shadow sides of American patriotism.[3]

---

[2]The Arizona press reported that by the end of 2009, there were "3,300 agents, more than 200 miles of fences and vehicle barriers, and 40 agents assigned to the agency's search, rescue and trauma team, Borstar, yet illegal immigrants [we']re still dying while trying to cross the Border Patrol's 262-mile-long Tucson Sector. Border-county law enforcement, Mexican Consulate officials, Tohono O'odham tribal officials and humanitarian groups sa[id] the increase in fencing, technology and agents has caused illegal border crossers to walk longer distances in more treacherous terrain, increasing the likelihood that people w[ould] get hurt or fatigued and left behind to die." Brady McCombs, "No Signs of Letup in Entrant Deaths." This article appeared in the December 27, 2009 *Arizona Daily Star*; unfortunately web access to the text no longer exists.

[3]Matt Garcia, "The Thousands of Children Fleeing Central America Have Nothing to Do With Our Ongoing Debate Over Immigration," *Zócalo Public Square* (July 10,

For this immigrant nation's "celebratory narrative" underscores ideas like hospitality, liberty, and democracy — we recall Emma Lazarus' "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Yet legislative debates about immigration have historically centred around issues of national security, economic instrumentalism and social costs rather than human rights. Today policy debates remain framed by a law-and-order lens, which casts unauthorized immigrants as wilful lawbreakers, posing national security threats. A criminal rhetorical frame facilitates scapegoating immigrants threats to the rule of law, without evoking scepticism about outdated policies such as the considerable mismatch between labour needs and legal avenues for pursuing work. In 2009 the Council on Foreign Relations' Task Force on U.S. Immigration Policy noted that the trend over the first decade of the 21st century of approximately 800,000 total undocumented immigrants arriving per year with the large majority finding employment indicates the legal migration system "has not remotely reflected market demand."[4] The rule of law rightly occupies a privileged place in our country, yet I was struck during my visit to an Operation Streamline hearing in Tucson, Arizona by the sharp contrast between our law-and-order rhetoric on the one hand, and the lack of accountability or transparency in Border Patrol procedures on the other — or the lack of due process afforded immigrant detainees. We watched young men and women shackled at the wrist, midsection, and ankles collectively herded through the legal process, lacking sufficient time with an attorney to comprehend what was happening and several lacking adequate translation. Migrants from Honduras flee a home with the world's highest number of homicides per capita where gang members murder with impunity — the threat driving many such migrants is precisely the breakdown of the rule of law at home.

Another common paradigm deems newcomers economic threats, whether as a net burden on the tax base or competitors for finite social resources and low wage work opportunities, a perception heightened in times of economic downturn. Beyond studies that consistently show immigrant labourers provide a net benefit to the U.S. economy, the detention industry profits off of irregular migrants

---

2014) available at http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2014/07/10/whats-happening-at-the-border-is-a-humanitarian-crisis-not-a-political-one/ideas/nexus/ accessed November 22, 2014.

[4]National Council on Foreign Relations (Jeb Bush and Thomas McLarty III, chairs, Edward Aldin, Project Director), *U.S. Immigration Policy,* Independent Task Force Report No. 53, Washington, DC: National Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, 50.

and confounds the "economic threat" frame. At a press event in the midst of Congressional reform debates in June of 2013, Texas Congressman Randy Weber insisted that "you don't get to come here and be 'takers,'" for example, even in the face of the Congressional Budget Office study that week which found that the reform package would reduce the federal debt by $197 billion in the next decade and $700 billion in the following decade and estimated "newly legalized immigrants would generate more tax revenue than they expend in federal benefits."[5] Moreover, elements of the "immigration industrial complex," have become a transnational, multibillion dollar affair.[6] Share prices for GEO group and Corrections Corporation of America spiked sharply this summer, with the influx of migrant children crossing the border in light of improved occupancy across their federal "real estate portfolios."[7]

A related lens is the perceived threat newcomers pose to a nation's identity, as evident in the face of resurgent nationalistic responses across diverse regions. In the United States anti-immigrant sentiment rooted in this construal of a fixed national identity over and above an "outsider" has led to the demonization of populations of colour through increasingly mainstream outlets — the United States saw a 40% increase in anti-Hispanic hate crimes between 2003 and 2007.[8] A political science study the following year tracked significant differences in white voter anxiety over news stories featuring immigrant Jose Sanchez vs. Nikolai Vandinsky.[9] The politics of exclusion continue to play out in the ongoing debates about executive

---

[5]Nicole Narea, "Latino Rights Groups Blast Rep. Weber for calling immigrants 'takers' during Capitol Hill rally," *Texas on the Potomac* (June 20, 2013) http://blog.chron.com/txpotomac/2013/06/latino-rights-groups-blast-rep-randy-weber-for-calling-immigrants-takers-during-capitol-hill-rally/ (accessed November 22, 2014).

[6]See Tanya Golash-Boza, "The Immigration Industrial Complex: Why We Enforce Immigration Policies Destined to Fail," Sociology Compass 3.2 (Feb 2009) 295-309 for a genealogy of this idea, which alludes to the conflation of national security with immigration law enforcement and "the confluence of public and private sector interests in the criminalization of undocumented migration, immigration law enforcement, and the promotion of 'anti-illegal' rhetoric" (295).

[7]Nicole Flatow, "Private Prison Companies' Stocks Soar as Companies Cash in on Incarcerated Immigrants," *Think Progress* (September 2, 2014) available at http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/09/02/3477866/private-prison-investors-see-profit-in-central-american-migrant-influx/ (accessed September 25, 2014).

[8]Spencer S. Hsu, "Hate Crimes Rise as Immigration Debate Heats Up," *Washington Post* (June 16, 2009).

[9]T. Brader, N.A. Valentino and E. Suhay, "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008) 959–978.

action and 2016 presidential election. On the whole these frameworks reflect legitimate concerns regarding the contemporary status of immigration, but employed on their own, they serve to distort and eclipse fundamental features of the whole picture.

There emerged great hope and expectation that these frameworks would dramatically alter after the initial election of President Barack Obama, hailed by many in immigrants' rights communities as nearly messianic. He backed off promises to overhaul immigration reform once elected to address the recession and health care reform. He has built a mixed record on immigration during his first and second terms in office, on balance. Whereas the Obama administration's approach replaces the large-scale employee targeted ambushes with company audits, his deportations exceed any administration's in history.[10] He has deported more than 2.1 million since taking office in 2009. Although immigrant rights communities have lauded the current Administration's moves to provide prosecutorial discretion and deferred action for certain childhood arrivals, its Secure Communities program "uses the fingerprints of people in custody for other reasons to identify deportable immigrants."[11]

Whereas the unaccompanied youth arrivals have abated for now, recent polls show diminishing trust in the Obama Administration's handling of immigration as a result. With both parties distancing themselves from the administration on the issue where contested 2014 midterm races factored, nativist rhetoric returned to the scene playing on familiar fears: The Tea Party Patriots launched a major new campaign that warns:

> An unprecedented wave of illegal immigration is washing over America today, threatening the very fabric of our nation. The Obama Administration refuses to enforce our immigration laws, resulting in tens of thousands of people illegally entering the US. Rather than securing our border, President Obama leaves it wide open, and instead of returning illegal immigrants to their home nation, our government is sending them

---

[10]The pace of company audits has roughly quadrupled since President George W. Bush's final year in office. The Obama administration has been moving away from using work-site raids to target employers. In August 2011 the administration introduced new guidelines for the use of prosecutorial discretion in deportation case review, potentially suspending deportation proceedings against those who pose little threat to national security or public safety.

[11]"Deportation of Illegal Immigrants Increases under Obama Administration," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2010, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/25/AR2010072501790.html (accessed July 30, 2010).

> to our hometowns. This isn't just a crisis for citizens who live in southern border states. Today, we all live in a border state.[12]

Hence operative lenses shaping the immigration debate can mask realities and can become surrogates for other cultural and political concerns. The voices of reluctant or desperate migrants rarely register in national debates about border control policy or visa quotas. I open with this context in attempt to scrutinize dominant rhetoric and shed light on the interests and values that principally drive immigration policy. If fear and profit largely hold sway, de-humanizing newcomers according to these dominant scripts, I suggest the Catholic tradition's commitments shape a different story, a (counter)narrative of our common humanity, our kinship, with implications for a just immigration ethic. Christian understandings of what it means to be human radically critique pervasive exploitation and prevailing immigration paradigms. Contributions from Scripture and the Catholic social tradition offer a counternarrative of civic kinship that challenges dominant, instrumentalist frameworks; I conclude with some reflections on challenges facing migrant women in particular, and how they challenge reigning immigration narratives.

Certainly the story of the Jewish and Christian pilgrim communities is one of migration, diaspora and the call to live accordingly. Indeed, after the commandment to worship one God, no moral imperative is repeated more frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures than the command to care for the stranger.[13] Despite convenient amnesia in our own nation of immigrants, "it was Israel's own bitter experience of displacement that undergirded its ethic of just compassion toward outsiders: 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Ex 22:21)."[14] When Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt, the émigré Holy Family

---

[12]Tea Party Patriots web homepage, http://www.teapartypatriots.org/theborderstates/ (accessed September 25, 2014).

[13]William O'Neill, SJ, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 127, 1 (Spring/Summer 2007). O'Neill cites W. Gunther Plaut, "Jewish Ethics and International Migrations," *International Migration Review: Ethics, Migration and Global Stewardship* 30 (Spring 1996) 18-36 at 20-21. For a comprehensive discussion of New Testament themes related to migration, see Donald Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles': New Testament Perspectives on Migration," in Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives in Migration,* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, 20-34.

[14]Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented,* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012, 15.

becomes the archetype for every refugee family.[15] In Matthew's gospel "Jesus begins his early journey as a migrant and a displaced person — Jesus who in this same gospel would radically identify with the 'least' and make hospitality to the stranger a criterion of judgment (Mt 25:35)."[16] Patterns of migration across scripture do not readily resolve complex modern dilemmas. Yet scripture shapes moral perception. By engaging the voice of scripture in a manner that dislocates dominant frameworks of interpretation we become attuned to how our perspective impacts our moral response and how scripture might enhance our perceptive imagination.

So if the conventional politics of immigration are driven in large part by instrumental values, what might a scriptural of politics immigration prioritize in shaping a Catholic counternnarrative? One of the most persistently recurrent themes in Scripture is justice and compassion for the vulnerable.[17] The Prophets repeatedly connect bringing justice for the poor to experiencing God ["He judged the cause of the poor and needy... Is not this to know me? says the Lord" (Jer 22:16)]. Concern for the economically vulnerable echoes throughout the New Testament as well, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, which depicts Jesus being born in a stable among mere shepherds and as inaugurating his public ministry in terms that emphasize his mission to bring good news to the poor and release the oppressed. New Testament scholar Donald Senior notes that in "the overall landscape of the gospel stories, the rich and powerful are often 'in place' — reclining at table, calculating their harvest, standing comfortably in the front of the sanctuary, or seated on the judgment seat passing judgment on the crimes of others. The poor, on the other hand, are often mobile or rootless: the sick coming from the four corners of the compass seeking healing; the crowds desperate to hear Jesus, roaming lost and hungry; the leper crouched outside the door."[18] Senior suggests the mobility and experiences of migrant people "reveal a profound dimension of all human experience" and "challenge the false ideologies of unlimited resources … of unconditional national sovereignty, and the absolute claim to individual satisfaction that," in his words, "plague our contemporary world and choke its spiritual capacity."[19]

---

[15]Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care to Migrants) (September 30, 1952), in *The Church,s Magna Charta for Migrants*, ed. Rev. Giulivo Tessarolo, PSSC, Staten Island, N.Y.: St Charles Seminary, 1962, introduction.

[16]Donald Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles,'" 23.

[17]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics,* London: Continuum, 2000, 76.

[18]Donald Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles,'" 27-8.

[19]Donald Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles,'" 29.

Hence whereas the Scriptures do not provide detailed solutions to contemporary economic and social challenges posed by immigration, "for people who turn to the Scriptures for guidance on how to live and what sort of people to become, it is clear they should show a deep concern for poor" and marginalized persons.[20] A concern for biblical justice — which demands active concern for the vulnerable and prophetic critique of structures of injustice[21] — challenges approaches to immigration driven by market or security concerns alone. A key contribution a scriptural imagination offers, then, is to bring perspectives of the most vulnerable and often silenced into the equation.

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, he identifies neighbour love and just living with care for the vulnerable stranger among us. Recall Jesus reverses the lawyer's expectations with the story of a perceived enemy's loving response to one in need lying in the ditch. Jewish audiences would have been shocked to hear of a discredited priest and a Samaritan exemplar. In the parable the priest and the Levite notice the wounded man yet "keep their distance to avoid any contact that might defile them."[22] Unlike the Samaritan who sees the man as a fellow human being in distress, the others did not allow themselves to be affected by his plight. By sharp contrast, the Samaritan "apprehends the situation as the man in the ditch experiences it." Typical of Jesus' parables where the "extraordinary keeps breaking out of the ordinary," the Samaritan "surpasses the care that would be appropriate for a fellow countryman to aid this stranger, who might belong to his ethnic groups' worst enemies."[23] Hence as William Spohn notes, "Jesus stretches the limits of vision and compassion precisely where fear, enmity and inconvenience want to constrict them."[24]

How might this parable where Jesus exposes the lawyer's categories as "too cramped" shape imagination about immigration? Posing the lawyer's very question of "who is my neighbour?" erects

---

[20]Christopher Vogt, Liturgy, Discipleship, and Economic Justice," in Mark Alman and Catholic Church, ed., *The Almighty and the Dollar: Reflections on Economic Justice for All,* Anselm Academic, 2012.

[21]John R. Donahue, SJ, "The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching: Will This Engagement Lead to Marriage?" in ed. Kenneth R. Himes, Associate ed., Lisa Sowle Cahill, Charles E. Curran, David Hollenbach, and Thomas Shannon, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations,* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 15.

[22]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 90.

[23]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 90.

[24]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise,* 91.

boundaries between members and outsiders. We quickly remove ourselves from the scene to balance (abstract) duties and obligations. Perceptions of immigrants as threats alone significantly influence immigration analyses. This prior question of perception shapes our assessment: whom do we see as the immigrant? Freeloaders who take advantage of American generosity while taking jobs from U.S. citizens? Threats to the neighbourhood? Outsiders overcrowding our kids' schools? The women I described at Casa Nazaret? The student whose narrative I recounted? If we "see" the face of immigration as "illegal" — anchor babies, forever foreigners — or if we "see" separated mothers, displaced 3rd generation small family farmers, taxpayers, honest workers, we pursue different avenues of analysis. Seeing immigrants' humanity as primary doesn't resolve conflicting claims over stretched resources or absolve cases of immigrant crime. Yet it does foreclose on death-dealing and profiteering practices and invite us away from simplistic scapegoating, toward lasting solutions. To get at root causes and complex motives, like the Samaritan, we must identify with and become neighbour to the immigrant.[25]

Jesus repeatedly serves as both host and guest across gospel narratives. He "preaches a radical hospitality to those in need, and ... commands the same of anyone hoping to sit down at the messianic banquet."[26] Gospel hospitality is unqualified in nature, and its issuance converts lives — a despised tax collector, an estranged Samaritan woman, the exiled blind — even as it provokes animosity and criticism.[27] Taking the victim's side as our own enjoins not only compassion but also liberation. Just as the Good Samaritan promises additional recompense to the innkeeper, Christians are called to enter the world of the neighbour and "leave it in such a way that the neighbour is given freedom along with the very help that is offered."[28] The "unfreedom" of present and would-be migrants pointedly illustrates the urgency of this responsibility. The radical hospitality that tutors our vision does not reduce the immigration paradigm to charity or largesse, or move it out of the inclusive civic conversation, but requires justice. An ethic marked by compassion

---

[25]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 91.

[26]Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God,* Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, 47.

[27]Gloria L. Schaab, "Which of These Was Neighbour? Spiritual Dimensions of the U.S. Immigration Question," *International Journal of Public Theology* 2 (2008) 182-202 at, 192-93.

[28]John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable,* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, 133. I am indebted to Christopher Vogt's work for this reference.

interprets situations from the perspective of those who suffer, inviting solidarity instead of exclusion.

Immigrants encounter legion forms of injustice: the standard treatment of day labourers (including rampant wage theft) violates fundamental fairness in exchange (commutative justice). The regional juxtaposition of relative luxury and misery while basic needs go unmet challenges basic notions of distributive justice. The nearly 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, spanning six Mexican and four U.S. states, bisects the sharpest divide in average income on the planet. The impact of free trade agreements and utterly outmoded visa policies impede rather than empower persons' active participation in societal life (social justice). A Christian ethic of immigration demands basic, unmet responsibilities in justice, particularly given the role the United States has played in shaping conditions that directly contribute to irregular migration.[29] In short justice for immigrants will not be achieved by pursuing market or security concerns alone.

In July of 2013, Pope Francis modelled a gospel hospitality that counters immigrant injustice. During his first official trip outside Rome since his election in March, Pope Francis celebrated mass on Lampedusa, an island in the southern Mediterranean that has become a safe haven for African migrants seeking passage to Europe. There he commemorated in ritual and word the estimated 20,000 African immigrants who have died over the past 25 years trying to reach a new life in Europe. Pope Francis' homily noted the pervasive idolatry that facilitates migrants' deaths and robs us of the ability to weep. In vestments of penitential violet, the pope celebrated mass within sight of the "graveyard of wrecks." [30] Amid his admission that even he remains "disoriented," and his plea for the grace to weep, he did not merely condemn "the world" for this indifference and its consequences, but repented: "Forgive us Lord!" whether for being closed in on our own well-being in a way that leads to anaesthesia of

[29]John J. Hoeffner and Michele R. Pistone, "But the Laborers Are... Many? Catholic Social Teaching on Business, Labor and Economic Migration," in *And You Welcomed Me: Migration and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, 55-92, at 74. For an excellent discussion of such connections see William R. O'Neill, SJ, "Anamnestic Solidarity: Immigration from the Perspective of Restorative Justice" paper delivered at the 2009 Catholic Theological Society of America Halifax, Nova Scotia (June 5, 2009).

[30]John Hooper, "Pope Francis condemns global indifference to suffering," *The Guardian (*July 8, 2013) available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/08/pope-francis-condemns-indifference-suffering (accessed on July 8, 2013).

the heart, or making global decisions creating situations that lead to these tragedies.[31] Pope Francis' reflections and symbolism underscore the need for ecclesial and civic repentance from complicity in injustice.

Hence attitudes and policies that compel and then punish irregular migration are profoundly at odds with Christian commitments. In particular, the tradition's understanding of human rights and the political community squarely challenges the fact that the vast majority of contributing and vulnerable migrants remain excluded from a viable, timely path to citizenship and its protections.[32] Returning to the U.S. context, the "unfreedom" immigrants experience fundamentally stems from their exclusion from membership in society. Undocumented immigrants remain deprived of the primary good of membership, or in Hannah Arendt's terms, "right to have rights."[33]

Flowing from its Scriptural "optic nerve" of compassion,[34] the Catholic social tradition champions robust rights for immigrants in its documents, outreach, witness and advocacy. Last year marked the 10th anniversary of the Mexican and U.S. bishops' joint pastoral, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope." The joint bishops' conferences called for the United States and Mexico to address root causes of and legal avenues for migration and to safeguard family unity; by contrast, border enforcement has remained the primary focus in the U.S. context. The consequent deportation-by-attrition practices and removal quotas have nevertheless failed to resolve the problem of a significant undocumented presence."

A Christian immigration ethic is grounded in its vision of the person as inherently sacred and made for community. All persons are created in the image of God and therefore worthy of inherent dignity and respect. Whereas this vision does not compromise autonomy, it understands humans as profoundly interdependent. Hence human rights are claims to goods necessary for each to participate with dignity in community life.[35] Catholic principles of economic and

---

[31]Pope Francis, "Pope on Lampedusa: 'The Globalization of Indifference,'" Vatican Radio (July 8, 2013) available at http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-on-lampedusa-the-globalization-of-indifferenc accessed July 8, 2013.

[32]Pope Pius XII, *Exsul familia*; Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (April 11, 1963); Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (March 26, 1967); Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 69, 71 see also Catechism of Catholic Church, 2402.

[33]See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966, chapter 9.

[34]William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 87.

[35]Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology,* New York: Paulist Press, 1993, 46.

migration ethics protect not only civil and political rights, but also more robust social and economic rights and responsibilities. These establish persons' rights *not to migrate* (fulfil human rights in their homeland) and *to migrate* (if they cannot support themselves or their families in their country of origin).[36] Once people do immigrate, the Catholic tradition profoundly critiques patterns wherein stable receiving countries accept the labour of millions without offering legal protections. Such "shadow" societies risk the creation of a permanent underclass, harming both human dignity and the common good.

Once people do immigrate, the Catholic tradition profoundly critiques patterns wherein stable receiving countries accept the labour of millions without offering legal protections. Such "shadow" societies risk the creation of a permanent underclass, harming both human dignity and the common good. From Pope Leo XIII's 1891 warnings against employers' exploitation through Pope Francis' condemnations of harmful global economic practices, the protection of human dignity has remained the central criterion of economic justice. The tradition makes clear that "every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines [human dignity] realized in community with others."[37] Pope John Paul II condemned the exploitation of migrant workers based on the principle that capital should be at the service of labour and not labour at the service of capital. This idea that the economy should serve the person raises serious concerns not only about the freedom of markets compared to people, but also about the significant financial stakes in the broken immigration system — detained immigrants fill beds, deportations fill private buses.

So we also inherit a counter-narrative of economic ethics critiquing global dynamics that allow capital and goods and information to flow freely across borders but not labourers as well as the concrete treatment of undocumented labourers. Pope Francis has been outspoken about the dictatorship of faceless economies that remain

---

[36]See Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (April 11, 1963) no. 106. All encyclical citations are taken from David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage,* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992, unless otherwise indicated. See also United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and *Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano*, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,* Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2003, no. 34-5.

[37]National Council of Catholic Bishops, "Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy Issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops," (November 13, 1986), Washington, D.C.: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Inc., 1986, nos. 1, 14.

distant from humane goals; his image of humans as commodities in a throwaway culture[38] particularly resonates with vulnerable migrant workers' experiences. The Southern Poverty Law Center recently interviewed 150 undocumented women across various sectors of the food industry, and respondents overwhelmingly reported "feeling like they were seen by the employers as disposable workers with no lasting value, to be squeezed of every last drop of sweat and labour before being cast aside."[39] Hence the Catholic social tradition explicitly protects the basic human rights of undocumented migrants in host countries in light of longstanding teachings on human and workers' rights, which do not depend on citizenship status.[40]

With more than 60 percent of undocumented immigrants in the United States having lived here for over ten years and 2 million undocumented students in primary and secondary schools across the country, a "double society" increasingly threatens the common good: "... one visible with rights and one invisible without rights — a voiceless underground of undocumented persons."[41] Obstructing viable paths to legalization for the majority of immigrants welcomed in the marketplace but not the voting booth, college campus, Department of Motor Vehicles, or stable workplace risks making permanent this underclass of disenfranchised persons, undermining not only Christian commitments but also significant civic values and interests. Ultimately an approach rooted in human rights championed by Catholic commitments must both reduce the need to migrate and protect those who find themselves compelled to do so as a last resort.

---

[38]Pope Francis, "Address to the New Non-Resident Ambassadors to the Holy See," May 16, 2013 available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130516_nuovi-ambasciatori_en.html (accessed June 1, 2013).

[39]Southern Poverty Law Center, "Injustice on Our Plates: Immigrant Women in the U.S. Food Industry," 23, 63.

[40]Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in America* "reiterates the rights of migrants and their families and the respect for human dignity 'even in cases of non-legal immigration." *Ecclesia in America,* Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1999, no. 65. Over recent decades social encyclicals have enumerated migrant rights to life and a means of livelihood; decent housing; education of their children; humane working conditions; public profession of religion; and to have such rights recognized and respected by host of government policies. See 1969 Vatican *Instruction on Pastoral Care* (no. 7); 1978 *Letter to Episcopal Conferences* from the Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrant and Itinerant peoples (no. 3); Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* (no. 17); Pope John XIII, *Pacem en terris* (no. 106); National Council of Catholic Bishops, *Resolution on the Pastoral Concern of the Church for People on the Move,* Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1976, and endorsed by Pope Paul VI; and "Strangers No Longer," no 38.

[41]National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Together a New People, Pastoral Statement on Migration and Refugees*, November 8, 1986, 10.

As unaccompanied women undertake the journey in increasing number — about half of migrants worldwide are female — they face unique threats, from sexual assault by smugglers and officials, to harassment on the job, to manipulation in detention facilities. (In terms of recent "surge" of migration, El Salvador and Guatemala rank in the top three for highest homicides against women and girls in the world). Less likely to qualify for employment-based immigration than men, the majority of migrant women work in unregulated jobs in the informal sector. Whereas undocumented immigrants earn lower wages than citizens in the same jobs, women routinely earn less than their male counterparts. Undocumented women are often perceived by predators as "perfect victims" of sexual assault: they remain isolated, uninformed about their rights, and are presumed to lack credibility.[42] Women farm workers hide their gender with baggy clothing and bandanas to deter assault: 80% of women of Mexican descent working in California's Central Valley report experiencing sexual harassment as compared to 50% of all women in the U.S. workforce, who experience at least one incident.[43] Beyond well-founded fears that reporting abuses will risk job loss and family separation via deportation, such women lack access to legal resources and face language barriers and cultural pressures.[44]

Widespread sexual abuse of women working at the Postville, Iowa meatpacking plant, for example, went unreported. Girls as young as fifteen who worked the plant's night shift were continually harassed by supervisors but noted they could not afford to speak up and lose their jobs, indebted as they remained to their coyotes (smugglers). Because these women understood that immigration officials collaborate with law enforcement, they did not seek help from the latter. Even those women courageous enough to come forward and participate in the U visa program, which gives victims of crime temporary legal status, often fail to see justice served. One hundred charges of sexual assault and harassment have been filed nationwide by farmworkers in the United States, yet no criminal prosecutions have been put forward in these cases. United Farmworkers' Association Co-Founder Dolores Huerta characterizes the reality as "an epidemic."[45]

---

[42]Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jeffrey S. Passel, Jason Ost, and Dan Perez-Lopez, "A Profile of the Low-Wage Immigrant Workforce," Urban Institute, Brief No. 4 (November 2003).

[43]Irma Morales Waugh, "Examining the Sexual Harassment Experiences of Mexican Immigrant Farmworking Women," *Violence Against Women* (January 2010) 8.

[44]Irma Morales Waugh, "Examining the Sexual Harassment...," 42.

[45]*Frontline*, "Rape in the Fields," produced in partnership with the Center for Investigative Reporting and Univision (June 25, 2013).

Migrant women frequently cite family reunification as their primary motive for migrating. Today 16.5 million people in the United States live in "mixed status families." Last year ICE removed 72, 410 immigrants who reported they had U.S.-born children.[46] In the aftermath of detention or deportation, families face major economic instability, and affected children suffer poor health and behavioural outcomes. Such foreseeable consequences violate fundamental norms regarding human dignity and care for the vulnerable. Escalating enforcement mechanisms continue to dismantle trust between immigrant and law enforcement communities, risking unreported crimes. Finally, beyond material need and family reunification, mounting violence increasingly fuels migration from some Central American communities. Nearly half of unaccompanied minors entering the U.S. report experiencing violence or threats by gangs, drug cartels, or state actors.[47] As a result, the number of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S. border has doubled annually from 2011-2014. Smuggling networks profit from these lower risk passengers who frequently turn themselves in upon crossing.

In spite of immigrants' courage and resilience, many of these patterns obscure their full humanity as spouses, parents and children. An operative value hierarchy prioritizing capital to persons diametrically opposes Christian values and is as subtly formative as it is harmful to families. From Pope Paul VI's concern for the survival of children and well-being of families in light of international development,[48] through Pope Francis' lament that we have forgotten how to weep for young men and women migrating to support family members who meet death en route,[49] Catholic social teaching decries systems that deny basic goods to families in the name of economic instrumentalism.

Beyond a critique of economic idolatry, the sanctity and social mission of the family developed in Christian ethics reorient immigration stakes away from deportation quotas or political

---

[46]Elise Foley, "Deportations Separated Thousands of U.S.-born Children from Parents in 2013," (June 25, 2014) available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/25/parents-deportation_n_5531552.html (accessed November 22, 2014).

[47]United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Mexico and the Need for International Protection," Washington, DC: UNCHR, March 12, 2014.

[48]Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (March 26, 1967), no. 80.

[49]Tom Kington, "Pope Criticizes Indifference toward Immigrants' Plight," *Los Angeles Times* (July 8, 2013).

calculations. Families comprise our most intimate relationships such that protracted separation threatens our very human subjectivity. Policies that undermine family unity frustrate this core relationally. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz characterizes *la familia* as the central institution in Latina/o culture, noting it functions as a duty, a support system, and a primary identity marker.[50] Hence for those migrant women whose agency is caught up in motherhood, the inability to provide for or reunite with children can fracture integrity in profound ways.

Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are replete examples of displaced families, revealing a pattern not unlike what we encounter today: "Families are forced to uproot themselves, leaving behind their homes, their relatives and friends, the security of their lands and their provisions, the familiarity of their language and support of their communities."[51] A Christian family ethic offers significant resources for reorienting the immigration paradigm in several constructive ways: its profoundly relational anthropology; the family as "domestic church" and mediator of covenantal love; and the family's social mission.

Catholic social thought integrates a family's intimate communion with its charge to mutually engage the broader social good. If families serve as basic cells of civil society — "schools of deeper humanity" — social conditions must protect their participation in the demands and benefits of the common good. Deprivation of dignified labour opportunities and traumatic enforcement mechanisms signify hostile social forces impeding immigrant families' access to social goods. In *Familiaris consortio* and *Centesimus annus* John Paul II connects families' call to reveal love and bring children into and up through the world to their vocation to practice hospitality and give witness through a preferential option for the poor.[52] Particularly in light of this social mission, policies that perpetuate family separation undermine human subjectivity and harm the common good.

Despite intermittent family values rhetoric on U.S. political and religious scenes, a relational anthropology confronts a culture with a primarily individualistic ethos that does not value caregiving labour. The credo in *el Norte* that we pull up our bootstraps and make our

---

[50]Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal," in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010, 171-190 at 181.

[51]Robert Fortune Sanchez, "Migration and the Family," *Catholic Mind* 79 (February 1981) 19-24 at 19-20.

[52]Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981), no. 44, 45, 47; *Centesimus annus* (May 1, 1981), no. 48.

own fate is as entrenched as it is incompatible with a solidaristic idea that we share each other's fate. A Christian understanding of humans as interdependent critiques migrant exploitation at personal, policy, and cultural levels.

Migrant women's experiences of assault on the move and on the job together with the disruption to family life that outdated visa policies and enforcement procedures incur expose patterns at odds with Christian commitments to human rights and the sanctity of family life. If the Good Samaritan parable attunes us to "see" the face of immigration in the women at Casa Nazaret in Nogales, we are reminded that migration decisions are rarely personal choices alone. A migrant woman's decisions to "abandon" her children for better long-term prospects for them, have sexual relations with another male migrant (or, as is increasingly common, inject contraceptives) to ensure "safe" passage, work without documents or reside without authorization occur within constrained social contexts. These means are not morally or otherwise desirable, but understanding the realities shaping these "choices" highlights the shortcomings of individualistic paradigms, absolutist categories, and approaches that privilege autonomy or sexual purity. Such women's experiences highlight the inadequacy of approaches that flatly criminalize irregular migrants (as in, "what part of illegal don't you understand?"). The U.S. criminal justice system and Christian churches alike too seldom focus on enduring structures and ideologies that abet crime and sin. The experiences of migrant women can help alert both spheres to these inadequate notions of agency.

Talking points that highlight scarce resources, scheming lawbreakers, or demographic threats fail to register the social contexts that compel migration and its harmful consequences: ruptured family lives, border deaths, and gender-based violence. Whereas fear of the other is easily mass-marketed, mutual understanding across difference can be harder to come by and engender. Toward this end, I conclude with a testimony from a recent graduate of my own university, José Arreola, who spoke out courageously on public radio a few summers ago in a series called "my life is true."

> We had to decide whether we were going north or south to get into California. My friend decided it was best to go south, to avoid a big snowstorm up north. But south would take us through Arizona. I really, really didn't want to go through Arizona.
>
> I got more and more nervous. I felt paralyzed. My friend kept asking me what my problem was. Finally, I told him: I'm undocumented. I came to

> the United States when I was three with my family. And Arizona had just passed a law that gave police officers the authority to check peoples' immigration status. If we got stopped in Arizona, I could be detained and deported.
>
> My friend is white. He comes from a really privileged, upper-class background. He attended a private high school, then Santa Clara University, with me. I went on scholarship. Politically, he sees things a little differently than I do. We've had our disagreements.
>
> He was quiet for a while.
>
> Then, he barraged me with questions. I answered the best that I could.
>
> Silence again.
>
> Then he told me about his grandfather, how he hadn't been able to find work in Ireland, so he decided to hop on a fishing boat, and get off in New York. He worked as a janitor, without citizenship. Now his son, my friend's father, is a high-ranking bank executive.
>
> The whole time, through Arizona, my friend drove, like, 50 miles an hour. He didn't even wanna change lanes. He told me he wasn't gonna lose his best friend. He wasn't gonna let that happen.
>
> The immigration debate became real to my friend in the car that day. We had a very different conversation than the one politicians are having right now. The minute actual undocumented immigrants are included, the conversation changes.
>
> Now, I'm completely open about my status. I'm still afraid. Conversations don't always go well. And it's always a risk. But as long as I remain in the shadows, I will never really get to know you, and you will never really know me.[53]

José's courage, together with the resilience of so many others, witnesses to enduring hope. Christians are called to live in anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17-25, Rev 21:1-4) and cooperate with the abundance of life already inaugurated (Jn 10:10). Taking the migrant's side as our own changes our perception with implications for political discourse, policy reforms, and ecclesial practices. Amid the pervasive scripts and misinformation that cloud the exploitation of immigrants, a Catholic ethic of kinship across borders offers guideposts along the journey from exclusion to solidarity.

---

[53]José Arreola, **"**Get to Know Me," National Public Radio / KQED Radio (Fri, Jul 8, 2011, 7:35 AM). Audio version in Arreola's voice available at http://www.kqed.org/a/perspectives/R201107080735 (accessed July 8, 2011).