

## Catholics, Immigration, and the Common Good

By Fr. Dominique Peridans

The following are considerations offered by someone engaged in the complex arena of Christian ministry. They are reflections by a Christian pastor, a minister in the Roman Catholic tradition, prompted by a statement on immigration issued in November 2007 by the three Bishops of Maryland — Edwin F. O'Brien of Baltimore, Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, and Michael A. Saltarelli of Wilmington — entitled “Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration.” (See the full text of the bishops’ statement in the Appendix at the end of this *Backgrounder*.)

These thoughts primarily seek to be a respectful response and a forthright questioning of that statement (and thus the immigration views of the American Catholic hierarchy more generally, since the statement reflects the views of many other bishops). Much of the content of this *Backgrounder* is thus necessarily theological. Indeed, it speaks first to the bishops, authors of the statement, and concerns persons of Christian faith. As such, it takes us beyond the immediate political sphere. And yet, as I try to articulate, Christian (or any other) ministry is not exercised in a social or cultural vacuum. Christian ministry eminently takes root in human experience (and is meant to lift human experience) and finds itself always in the context of a human community, of a body politic, be it local or national. The community, therefore, and the reality of the common good, can never be ignored if ministry is to be honest and true, and truly effective.

“Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration” is a pastorally sensitive statement. However, in the vagueness of its expression, the statement can lead to confusion. It is my intention to raise a few respectful questions, and to attempt to offer a few elements of response. I raise these questions not only as a Christian minister, but also as a citizen, and as a child of (Belgian) immigrants. My concerns are articulated in greater depth in the pages that follow. Hereunder are a few of them in summary fashion:

- A seemingly simplistic passage is made from the mandate to love (which, of course, includes the mandate to “welcome the stranger”) to public policy, as though “catholicity of heart” immediately translates into open borders. The statement gives no tools for discernment, because the important distinctions between a philosophical perspective and a theological perspective are not made.
- There is an acknowledgment of the need for law (“Illegal entry is not condoned,”) but, in the same breath, practically speaking, such respect for law is disregarded (“but undocumented immigrants are embraced.”) Indeed, the qualification “undocumented” — as distinguished from “illegal” — is ambiguous because, as mainstream media seem so often to try to do in using the former, it implies that the distinction between “legal” and “illegal,” when it comes to immigration, is morally irrelevant.
- Little mention is made of the common good of the *national* family, only of the universal human family, when an important discussion needs to be had regarding the reality of a sovereign state.
- No mention is made of the current imbalance in immigration, i.e. the fact that the majority of current immigrants are “Hispanic.”



## Philosophy vs. Theology

The question of immigration is one that I have pondered at length, encouraged to do so by life in a bilingual (French-English) home, and, later, by seven years of ministry in Laredo, Texas, the busiest port between the United States and Mexico. I share with utter simplicity some of the fruit of my reflection on this issue.

The bishops' statement is a rather *general* statement, so general that it becomes vague, such that many key questions are left untreated, and, dare I say with all due respect, few tools are given for healthy, wise, and thus truly compassionate discernment. Too many important distinctions are missing. Catholics need not only to be encouraged to love, but need to be given tools for the discernment of *how to love* intelligently and respectfully.

The statement, and those who read it, would be served well if a more explicitly philosophical perspective were articulated, one that is clearly communicated as such. The issue of immigration is for Christians also a *philosophical* one, without which perspective the Church contributes to the tensions and confusion. The philosophical perspective is the one that allows us to dialogue in the political arena, and is the only one that can be used to forge public policy. Catholics ought to be urged not only "to consider prayerfully the question of immigration," as the bishops recommend, but also to consider *philosophically* the question of immigration, that is to say, with sound and thoughtful consideration based on the human reality of the common good. Not to do so is to fall into a form of *fideism*. In other words, not to do so is to eliminate the role of reason in rightly ordering the sphere of the "authentically secular" (as Pope Benedict XVI calls it), making, for example, a "facile move from Bible quoting to public-policy prescription" (to quote Fr. John Neuhaus in his critique of the stance on immigration of Roger Mahoney, Archbishop of Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>), against which the Church (most recently, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI) cautions Catholics. Indeed, in the bishops' statement, there are abrupt shifts from philosophical consideration to theological consideration and back, with no mention of the distinctions between the two. There is suggestion of passing from the "universality" of love (to which the Christian believes God indeed calls) to a public policy of limitless welcome of immigrants. Paragraph five of the statement typifies this, and leaves the reader wondering on which foot he or she is to dance:

In the Church, a universal body united through Christ, all find a home. Illegal entry is not condoned, but undocumented immigrants are

embraced. "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters."

The divisions regarding immigration in the public forum, to which the bishops' statement alludes, in fact, stem from fundamentally differing *philosophical perspectives* of community. We indeed have two fundamentally different philosophical perspectives: that of the legitimacy of a sovereign state whose common good must be protected and promoted (and, of course, in which increasing numbers can participate), and that of the *il-*legitimacy of a sovereign state, an increasingly popular perspective in certain circles of Western civilization, which underlies the promotion of the elimination of borders. The statement seems to suggest that, as Christians, we ought perhaps to embrace the latter perspective, a perspective which is, again, philosophically unsound, for it disrespects the reality of the political community.

The human family is the basic cell of society, and thus the first analogue for trying to understand the nation, that is to say, the sovereign state, and for trying to understand the question of the common good. Quite simply, what is true of the family is analogously true of the nation. In both communities, we speak of the common good, in the light of which and in reference to which any community — from the family to the nation — is understood. The common good is that which the members of said community share. The common good is comprised essentially of a community's patrimony, a community's traditions, and it bears a community's general mindset, a community's social and political vision. When the common good disappears, so does the community. A community, therefore, has a right, and an obligation, to protect its patrimony and to invite others to join the community *respectful* of this patrimony. The common good *must* be protected and promoted. The common good grows as the community's members *together* grow in quality and quantity (number).

To these ends laws are established, *for the sake of the common good*. The bishops' statement says that "the rule of law must be respected." Why? In the end, it is because the common good, which is real, must be respected. The bishops make insufficient mention of the common good. To the degree members of a community transgress the law, they transgress the common good, and thus their neighbor. If certain laws are perceived as not truly serving the common good (immigration laws, for example), they ought to be changed (through channels respectful of the common good), not transgressed

— even in the name of charity. Indeed, “our Catholic faith urges us to participate in the public debate with charity,” but it is the common good that, practically speaking, *determines* the debate, the common good in which Catholics participate and which Catholics must respect.

It has been stated elsewhere by the same local leadership of the Church that the United States currently has “hard and unjust immigration laws.”<sup>2</sup> I ask in what way are they “hard and unjust?” The United States has the most generous immigration policy in the world. In 2008, 1,107,126 people were granted green cards. Where is the hardness and injustice? If, however, we are speaking of the *application* of immigration laws — which is a very distinct issue, it ought to be articulated clearly. The distinction is paramount. There are perhaps issues to be addressed regarding the application of immigration laws, but the leap from humane treatment of illegal immigrants to open borders, as is — for all intents and purposes — suggested, is enormous and erroneous. One cannot pass from incidents of injustice in the application of laws to generalizations about the laws themselves, thereby undoing their intelligibility. It is a slippery intellectual slope. As suggested above, a very important theological principle regarding the Christian life is negated: “grace does not destroy nature.” And a very important truth about the nature of faith is equally negated: “faith does not destroy reason.”

If a nation is a natural human reality, then any faith statements by the Church must respect the reality of the nation. If a nation is a sovereign community of persons who have the right and human obligation to protect their common good, then they have the right and human obligation — all the while being generous in their welcome — to control the influx of persons into the community, so not excessively to disturb the community socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally. Any theological perspective, and thus any faith statements by the Church, must take into account and respect the common good. And so, at least three important questions arise:

- What is the Church’s responsibility toward the common good?
- Should the Church be actively encouraging new immigrants to embrace the common good, i.e. American patrimony and culture?
- To what extent is the Church’s promotion of parallel cultural realities disrespectful of the common good?

The real lack of acknowledgement of the common good is manifested, for example, in the primacy given to the welfare of immigrants. Such a perspective obviously shifts the focus away from the more basic truths of the common good, and thus does a disservice to any clarification of the issue. There is an order in charity. As Thomas Aquinas states, “In matters concerning relations between citizens, we should prefer our fellow citizens.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the welfare of the community is a more immediate concern than that of immigrants — which, of course, does not mean that we should not be very sensitive to the latter. Such is the realism, however, of being part of a community. Do we not say that “well-ordered charity begins at home?” Given the reality and legitimacy of the sovereign nation, it is, therefore, important to state that free migration is not a basic human right. Frequent statements like “the Church stands with undocumented immigrants”<sup>4</sup> can easily suggest the contrary. The vagueness of Church statements on immigration leaves one truly wondering what exactly it means to “stand with undocumented immigrants”?

### Legal vs. Illegal: An Issue for Believers?

The question then is, “To what extent is a nation, any nation, obliged to welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to enter it?” There is indeed tremendous, unfortunate economic disparity in the world. To speak of a “third world” is a grave embarrassment. But such a question is largely that of *foreign policy*, distinct from that of *immigration policy*. Does the United States have an obligation to welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to cross her borders, and join her? Do Catholics have an obligation in charity to promote such policy, that is to say, an open-border policy? Does the common good of the universal human family truncate or negate the common good of the national family? Or, again, does well-ordered charity not begin at home?

Generosity is a must. Fair international economic policy is a must. Open borders, however, are not a must — if there is such a thing as a national community. If there is such a thing as a national community, open borders are the negation of the common good, and blurring the lines of legality of status in a country is a lack of healthy and respectful realism regarding the common good. If the common good of the national family is to be protected and promoted by all members of the community, including Catholics, then the distinction between legal immigrant and *il*-legal immigrant is not morally irrelevant. It is, in fact, a fundamental distinction that cannot be ignored, a distinction between persons who respect the common good and persons who do

not respect the common good. “The Church is (indeed) the place where illegal immigrants are recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters,” for the Church is the place where *all* are recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. But the illegality of such brothers and sisters — as harsh as this may sound to certain ears — cannot be promoted if Catholics are to respect the common good of the national family. Open borders advocacy is civilly and socially disrespectful. Immediate, temporary, transitional assistance for a person in distress who is here illegally is a mandate from Christ, but it is not on the same level as public policy.

The history of the United States — as the history of every nation — is unfortunately marked by intolerance and discrimination. It is here above all, that Catholics — respectful of the rule of law — are to be ferment of communion and change of hearts. Catholics must, beginning with themselves, be converted unto unconditional love of neighbor. But looking lovingly on your neighbor does not necessitate blurring the line of distinction between legal and illegal. In fact, in respecting the distinction, the Church manifests her respect for the common good, and brings clarity and peace to those who, feeling overwhelmed by the large influx of recent immigrants, are tempted to group together unfairly legal immigrants with illegal immigrants, and to make sweeping statements about them, in particular about the largest group of them: “Hispanics.” Immigration policy is a question of respect for the common good. Protection of a nation’s borders is a question of respect for its common good. Such policy and such protection in no way preclude kindness and sensitivity. Enforcement of law is not necessarily a question of harshness (as is so often portrayed in the media).

It also would have been helpful if the bishops’ statement framed the reason for recent debate more precisely and accurately. The question of immigration has indeed moved to the center of public debate. But why? The question of immigration has moved to the center of public debate because of unbridled, unchecked *illegal* immigration that has left the majority of the American population terribly uncomfortable.

The statement seems to have a subtext, suggested from its very title (“Where *all* find a home”), a subtext that is oddly and disappointingly similar to the majority of mainstream media. There is vague, even weak, reference to the need for law concerning immigration (for, one might presume, it is obvious that, without law, there is social chaos), but any policy that is seemingly anything less than unconditional welcome of any and all immigrants in “need” (i.e. open borders) is (or at least comes across as being) hastily qualified as “tense” and

“confused” and “intolerant” and “discriminatory” (to use the statement’s adjectives that qualify the current debate).

Reference to respect for immigration law is so often made by the bishops who then, in the same breath, seem to invite *dis*-respect for law. How could anyone want to enforce immigration law when they are pushed back against the wall, “Dare we look at them with and through the eyes of Christ for whom no one is illegal?”<sup>5</sup> Such statements are ambiguous, and frankly guilt-inducing. Let us not forget that Jesus Christ said, “Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus had great respect for the reality of the state, and thus civil authority. To claim that someone who has entered a country illegally is law-abiding makes no sense, and is to suggest that immigration laws are morally irrelevant. Our welcome of immigrants ought to be *generous*, not unconditional. The latter is disrespectful of the common good.

### What Is “Hispanic” Ministry?

I spent seven years in Laredo, Texas. There I lived 15 minutes by bicycle from the bridge that crossed into the heart of Nuevo Laredo, a large Mexican border city of approximately 400,000 people. Laredo was fascinating in many ways, and obliged reflection on questions of community, the common good, cultural assimilation, and how the Church ought to navigate such issues.

I found myself a “minority,” so to speak, in the midst of a people who surprisingly (for the most part) does not consider itself to be Mexican. And yet, I was “Anglo.” “Anglo” is, of course, an appellation essentially predicated on that of “Hispanic” (or “Latino”). Such an intriguing appellation manifests the superficial and simplistic (and, dare I say, counter-productive) labeling of persons that has become an American pastime. In the case of “Anglo” and “Hispanic” we see how confusing such labeling has become, for, in order to “accommodate” the latter, the categories of race and language have been combined under the nebulous heading of “ethnicity,” leaving even the Census Bureau at a loss.

The bishops of Maryland statement regarding immigration is indeed largely with respect to this currently predominant group of recent immigrants to the United States, of those whom we call “Hispanic.” The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are actually terms that do not really exist outside of the United States. They are American mental constructs, that create a generic category of persons, and, might I add, the facile, univocal adoption of the term “Hispanic” by the Church (with little philosophical reflection as to its significance)

frankly poses questions, and indeed merits further discernment. The very important question of the nature of “Hispanic ministry” beckons sound exploration.

I asked the National Council of La Raza, “the largest national ‘Latino’ civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States,” to define “Hispanic” for me. Their initial (quickly received) response was entirely dissatisfying. They in fact hide behind the confusion of the Census Bureau:

The terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau to identify persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, and Spanish descent; they may be of any race.

In my response, I made the following statement and asked the following questions, which I believe the Church, who has adopted the category “Hispanic,” must answer. By the way, the questions have yet to be answered by La Raza. If I allow myself a note of cynicism, I can only guess that real answers to them might undermine an agenda.

Given the racial and cultural diversity of this vast grouping, it would seem that the only real thing that associates such persons is the Spanish language. If so, a few questions arise:

- What becomes of those Americans of such descent who do not speak Spanish?
- What of persons from these countries who speak indigenous languages rather than Spanish?
- If the associative factor is the Spanish language, does not this appellation give primacy to the Spanish colonization over the indigenous cultures?
- Are persons “Hispanic” in these various countries? *Or*
- Is “Hispanic” a mental construct conceived in the United States?
- Do not persons from Spain prefer to be called *Spaniard*, since such an appellation recognizes *their* culture?

- Why use the categorization, given how generic and vague it is and how it eliminates racial and cultural diversity?

The Church’s evaluation of the current immigration situation must avoid the generalities common to civil society. One would hope that it is in the Church where the most nuanced thinking would be found. For the Church, whose mission entails highlighting and embracing the uniqueness of each individual, of each child of God, to use sweeping categories such as “Hispanic” (or “Latino”) is unfortunate and simplistic. To be truly philosophically sound and consistent, and to be truly respectful of diversity, the Church ought to refer to this portion of her flock as a whole as Hispanophone (“Spanish-speaking”). Otherwise, we ought to speak of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans and Bolivians, etc., that is to say, of real cultural groups, and this only to the extent that persons have a real (not imagined) association with them.

### Latinos: “Objects of Suspicion, Intolerance, and Discrimination”?

The Hispanophone population is, by many standards, quite privileged. We are, in fact, in many places, experiencing the bilingualization of the United States with little or no input from the American people. What reasonable American would ever expect such privileges abroad? We are experiencing this bilingual phenomenon (to the exclusion, by the way, of other linguistic groups, including the 1.8 million French-speakers) when language is constitutive of the *koinonia* (fellowship or sharing) that maintains social cohesion — in the midst of other forms of diversity. A little trip to Belgium, for example, would erase any doubts about the cultural and national divisiveness of bilingualism.

I recall a recent year spent at a parish with a fairly large “Hispanic” population, such that there was a full-time associate pastor from El Salvador, to minister to them. In the parish there is a separate Religious Education program for this community within the community (that is to say, a fairly *separate* community) when all of these young people attend the same schools as the larger body of the parish’s young people, are friends with them, and when many of them socialize among themselves in English. My office was next to that of this other associate pastor. Most of the time, I would hear the children playing in the hallway in English. And I was told that many of them actually wish to be part of the larger youth program.

When I asked this associate pastor why he supported the extra logistical and financial burden to the parish for a program that, as far as I could tell, was largely unnecessary, he told me that it was the parents who wanted it. Through interaction with some of the members of the “Hispanic” community (who were often invited to broader parochial gatherings, but most often declined the offer), I came to realize what I had heard and still hear in various circles: They have little intention of participating in the larger common good. They will do what they can to retain their cultural heritage even if it means creating a new, supposed “heritage” called “Hispanic,” and even if it means ignoring the existent cultural reality that is “American.”

Two questions arose in my mind:

- Are we serving the common good of the parish, when what has been created, thanks to such cultural gymnastics, is *two* communities, whose true common good, i.e. membership in this spiritual entity, the Church — which transcends culture, is largely being ignored?
- Is the parish supposed to be a cultural tool that supersedes the spiritual reality of the one body that we are meant to be?

The fact that “Latinos” have become the “objects of suspicion, intolerance, and discrimination” is, dare I say, *almost* understandable. What is to be thought of persons who, in apparently large numbers, often do not seem to respect the common good by not wanting to integrate? What is to be thought when more than 10 percent of the Mexican population has moved north of the border? It is the equivalent of two million North Koreans moving into South Korea, of 130 million Chinese crossing the border into Russia, of 14 million Russians pouring into Germany, of 30 million Americans landing in Iraq. If well-ordered charity begins at home, then the Church ought to extend compassionate understanding to *American citizens* as they struggle with what amounts, in many ways, to an “invasion.” The American people are understandably uncomfortable: when they see their neighborhoods quickly changing, large numbers of persons with whom they cannot communicate, large numbers of persons who sometimes do not seem to want to communicate with them, persons who, after many years in the United States, still refer to another country as their country. The discomfort is, once again, exacerbated when the important distinctions between civil duties and Christian duties is blurred. When an official statement

by members of the hierarchy includes in the definition of neighbor “undocumented immigrants” as though the distinction between legal and illegal is ethically neutral, and without articulating that obligations to the common good remain, light is not shed, but obscured.

### The Church and the Promotion of Fair Immigration

Moreover, fair immigration means allowing equal-opportunity immigration, which is not the current case in the United States. As Yale professor Amy Chua has written:

That the 11 million to 20 million illegal immigrants are 80 percent Mexican and Central American is itself a problem...if the U.S. immigration system is to reflect and further our ethnically neutral identity, it must itself be ethnically neutral, offering equal opportunity to Sudanese, Estonians, Burmese, and so on. The starkly disproportionate ratio of Latinos — reflecting geographical fortuity and a large measure of law-breaking — is inconsistent with this principle.<sup>7</sup>

As regards the question of fair immigration, two questions arise:

- Why is the Catholic Church in the United States not addressing the imbalance in immigration, i.e. the disproportionately high numbers from Mexico? Why does the Church seem to be contributing to it, for example, by equipping our seminarians to be able to exchange linguistically with them and no others from outside the Hispanophone world?
- Why do we not decry the immigration policies of countries such as Mexico which make our borders look like the pearly gates?

### No Comfortable Solution

Serving basic human needs is indispensable (cf. I John 3:17). And charity urges us to provide for whomever may appear on our doorsteps. But, again, such concrete and generous love does not translate directly into public policy. The argument that is based on circumstance (“Well, you cannot simply deport 12-20 million people”) and not an understanding of the common good is not an

argument, but rather resignation or the promotion of an ideology. Resignation and/or ideology are always, in the long run, contrary to love.

What ought to be done is obviously a question with no easy solution. The Catholic finds him or herself with a heavy heart, caught between various options: that of legalizing a massive influx of persons, which seems to be the higher road of charity, and that of enforcement of existent law, which will lead to some attrition, and which is more respectful of the common good. Whatever option is pursued as a nation, we need to grow in love, which will hopefully purify us of the greed that has so greatly contributed to our getting into this immigration bind, the same greed that has induced so many to turn a blind eye.

It would be extremely helpful for the Church hierarchy to articulate for the faithful the need for great sensitivity and generosity in immediate, emergency care for illegal immigrants, but also the fact that they remain *illegal*, and that our ministry should not and cannot circumvent their illegality. The fact that the eyes of Christ first see all of us as children of God does not mean that they do not see the human reality of the community, and thus such illegality. It makes discernment perhaps more emotionally challenging. But, at least, there is some clarity, for the fundamental truths of the human community, which our faith respects, remain. It is indeed my wish that true, honest dialogue on this terribly sensitive issue in the Church can some day be had.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Who Speaks for the Church?” *First Things*, June 15, 2007, <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2007/6/who-speaks-for-the-church>.

<sup>2</sup> “The Church’s Beacon Shines Brightly,” *The Catholic Review*, Archbishop Edwin O’Brien, July 16, 2008, <http://www.catholicreview.org/subpages/storyworld-new-new.aspx?action=4072>.

<sup>3</sup> Summa Theologica II-II, Q. 26, “Of the order of charity”, art. 8, respondeo.

<sup>4</sup> “The Church’s Beacon Shines Brightly,” op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 22:21.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Chua, “The Right Road to America?” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2007, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/14/AR2007121401333\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/14/AR2007121401333_pf.html).

## Appendix: Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland, November 2007

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Increasingly, immigration is moving to the center of the public debate, not only in the halls of Congress and in Annapolis and other state capitals, but also in our neighborhoods, schools, churches, and homes. Too often, discussions are marked by tension and confusion; at least as often, they are accompanied by a sincere longing to understand...and to be understood. Questions of legality, economics, and the mix of cultures often dominate the immigration debate. As Catholics, we must move past divisions and remain focused on the dignity of the human person and the welfare of families.

We therefore urge Maryland Catholics to consider prayerfully the question of immigration, including illegal immigration. The rule of law must be respected. The discussion, however, cannot end there. Undocumented immigrants are persons with dignity — a reality that obliges us to learn about the immigration system, understand the motives for migration, and consider the needs of individuals and families. Our American ideals call us to participate in the public debate; our Catholic faith urges us to do so with charity.

All people have the right to have their basic needs met in their homelands. When the means to fulfill those needs do not exist at home, people have the right to seek them abroad.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, sovereign nations have the right to control their borders, provided the regulations promote the common good of our universal human family. Not surprisingly, these two rights may conflict. When they do, receiving nations with the ability to accommodate migrants are urged to respond with generosity so individuals have the opportunity to meet their basic needs and so families remain united.

This teaching flows not only from our profound respect for the human person and families, but also from Sacred Scripture. Strangers and sojourners, as St. Paul calls them, appear on the biblical scene in Genesis and remain prominent throughout the Old Testament. They are regularly referenced along with widows and orphans as vulnerable persons who must be treated with justice and compassion.

In the New Testament, we encounter our faith's most precious migrants — the Holy Family. St. Matthew's Gospel recounts the flight of St. Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and the Infant Jesus into Egypt to escape the wrath of a jealous king: "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph ... are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien, and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil."<sup>2</sup>

In the Church, a universal body united through Christ, all find a home. Illegal entry is not condoned, but undocumented immigrants are embraced. "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters."<sup>3</sup>

The history of the Church in the United States compels us to care in a unique way for the welfare of today's immigrants. Our immigrant ancestors helped build the Church here and helped establish a thriving American political system. The first American citizen to become a saint — Frances Xavier Cabrini — was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the universal patroness of immigrants. Catholic immigrants of every generation have experienced discrimination and intolerance at the hands of those who arrived before them. In the 1600s and 1700s, Maryland Catholics were denied the right to vote, hold public office and celebrate Mass in a church. "No Irish Need Apply" was a staple of employment ads in the 19th and 20th centuries. Descendants of enslaved Africans continue to suffer the bitter fruits of slavery and segregation. Today, like their immigrant predecessors, Latinos often are the objects of suspicion, intolerance, and discrimination. Maryland Catholics should wel-

come discussion of immigration and the challenges it can present. We must also recognize distinctions in the debate: The legality of a person's entry into the United States is one issue; our response to him now that he's here is a separate one. The former is the government's responsibility; the latter is also ours. When we exercise that responsibility, we should keep in mind the command of the Lord in the Old Testament: "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt."<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic Church reaches out to migrants in many ways. Catholic dioceses and parishes throughout the world strive to meet not only the spiritual needs, but also the basic human needs, of all people. Catholic Relief Services, headquartered in Baltimore, assists 80 million people worldwide, including many who have been displaced by war, genocide, and the threat of starvation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops works for a just federal immigration policy and promotes economic initiatives that help people stay in their homelands. In Maryland, immigrants are served through the good work of organizations like the Hispanic Apostolate in Baltimore, the Spanish Catholic Center in Langley Park, and the Seton Center in Princess Anne.

The Church's work at all these levels is essential, but so too are the work and words of individual Catholics. Marylanders of good will must come together to honestly, respectfully, and prayerfully discuss their concerns about immigration. These discussions may not produce a change in national policy or impact the numbers or legal status of immigrants in our communities, but they will help us find local solutions to local challenges. Most importantly, they will help neighbors — citizens and documented and undocumented immigrants alike — see Christ in each other.

To facilitate these vital conversations, we commend to you four simple informational pieces produced by the Maryland Catholic Conference. These documents — focusing on the process, history, economics, and root causes of immigration — are intended to foster thoughtful discussion and have been made available to all parishes. These resources and others may be found at [www.mdccathcon.org](http://www.mdccathcon.org). We hope you take advantage of them and pray that this season may produce a harvest of goodwill and fraternal charity among all who call or seek to call the United States home.

Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien, Archbishop of Baltimore

Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington

Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli, Bishop of Wilmington

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<sup>1</sup> "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope," a pastoral statement concerning migration from the bishops of the United States and Mexico, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> "Exsul Familia," Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> "Undocumented Migrants," Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:34.





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# Backgrounder

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By Fr. Dominique Peridans

The following are considerations offered by someone engaged in the complex arena of Christian ministry. They are reflections by a Christian pastor, a minister in the Roman Catholic tradition, prompted by a statement on immigration issued in November 2007 by the three Bishops of Maryland — Edwin F. O'Brien of Baltimore, Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, and Michael A. Saltarelli of Wilmington — entitled “Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration.”

These thoughts primarily seek to be a respectful response and a forthright questioning of that statement (and thus the immigration views of the American Catholic hierarchy more generally, since the statement reflects the views of many other bishops). Much of the content of this *Backgrounder* is thus necessarily theological. Indeed, it speaks first to the bishops, authors of the statement, and concerns persons of Christian faith. As such, it takes us beyond the immediate political sphere. And yet, as I try to articulate, Christian (or any other) ministry is not exercised in a social or cultural vacuum. Christian ministry eminently takes root in human experience (and is meant to lift human experience) and finds itself always in the context of a human community, of a body politic, be it local or national. The community, therefore, and the reality of the common good, can never be ignored if ministry is to be honest and true, and truly effective.

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