

Complexities of immigration

When Arizona passed its recent law about immigrants, emotions flared. People of good will are caught between the truly American sentiment of the rule of law, and the equally American instinct to help the less fortunate and protect the vulnerable.

As Catholics we are bound by mercy. When we were baptized, the priest, deacon or bishop anointed us with holy chrism and charged us to “remain forever a member of Christ, who is priest, prophet and king.” And so we were configured to live as Christ.

The “king” part recalls the special role that Old Testament kings had, to care for the widow, orphan and alien, since widows, orphans and aliens had no one to protect them. Regardless of our stance on immigration we are bound to immigrants – through our baptism. We are bound to justice on their behalf. We should form an opinion on immigration, one informed by what our church teaches.

Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien has written movingly on the topic. The American bishops have a program we should all become familiar with – “Justice for Immigrants.” Otherwise our opinion can very likely be based on personal preferences – and prejudices.

A week after the Arizona legislation was signed, I got a call from a parishioner. His wife (we’ll call her Lydia) had taken their eldest daughter to the bus stop to wait for the school bus. After the daughter boarded the bus and headed off to school, immigration officials arrested the woman and put her in jail for deportation proceedings. The family is extremely generous. For every parish event they help out and she cooks mountains of food. Every Dec. 8 the wife cooks a dinner for those who gather for Mass that evening. This year the couple organized the festival in honor of St. Joseph. Now Lydia wonders when she will see her children again, the couple has three all born in the United States, she wonders when she will leave. The children are bewildered, confused and sad.

We like to think that the immigration issue is cut and dry with clear answers. It could be if we lived in a world of cold logic where humans had no place. That isn’t our world – it is the world of fundamentalists who make everything luringly simple

and frighteningly inhumane. Our world has people in it and things are much more complex than we would like to admit.

Working in a parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, I remember one Saturday evening after Mass some of the young adults came to me and said, “Father, let’s go out for pizza.” That meant, “Father, will you treat us to dinner tonight?” Of course I said yes. During the course of dinner the conversation turned to immigration. Two of the young adults were legal residents, three were not. The three undocumented successively told their stories of arriving in the country, the difficulties and dangers of crossing the desert and the constant fear they lived with.

The last one spoke of arriving on a plane. I asked the question on everyone’s mind. “Didn’t you have to pass through immigration?” “Oh, yes, of course” was the answer. “And how did you do that?” I persisted. “Oh,” came the response, “the person who organized the trip for us handed us each a crisp hundred dollar bill before we got off the plane and told us to put it in our passports. We did, and then arriving at immigration he pointed out which immigration agents we were to go to. We followed his instructions.” “Did they stamp your passport?” I asked in complete disbelief. “No.” I remember feeling sick to my stomach. I thought – we don’t do this in this country.

It was another chapter in my continuing learning about the complexities of immigration. We should all continue to learn about the people whose lives are disrupted by immigration – whether of the immigrants themselves or those whose lives are truly negatively impacted by immigrants. Then, with hearts and consciences formed by the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching, we are called to justice.

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