

Exiles among us

In a recent homily, it was suggested that all of us are exiles – at least in some internal, psychological or spiritual way – from the abundant life God holds out for us. There may well be some food for thought here, but for me, especially as I write this article, “exiles” most clearly applies to those who are literally exiled from their homelands because of war, or out of economic or some other necessity. I am writing particularly about immigrants, especially those who are poor and who – in our government’s eyes – lack the necessary papers to prove their right to be here. These people are a part of just about every community in our land; they are generally hard workers with strong family values, and provide services that allow our communities to function.

Part of my concern about immigrants is a trip I took last May with Witness for Peace, to southern and northern Mexico, and then into Arizona. We witnessed the root cause for much of the migration northward – the devastating economic hardship that makes survival nearly impossible for millions of Mexicans and other Latin Americans. We also witnessed the deadly conditions under which they migrate. The glimpses we had into the lives of our brother and sister immigrants were heart-rending. The fact that their need to migrate – to become “exiles” – was significantly exacerbated by U.S. trade and economic policies tore me apart.

In Oregon, where I live, and no doubt in your community, this group is too often treated unconscionably in the name of “national security.” Here, in an area with a small Latino population, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE, a division of Homeland Security) “disappears” an average of three to four individuals per week into an inhumane deportation system. As they are funneled through our county jail, the new life they have created for themselves is violently disrupted, families broken up, providers taken away. Their close-knit community is terrorized.

Only about one quarter of these people whom we’ve tracked for several years appear to our legal counsel to have been detained in accord with the law; and we know from our research and from horror stories we have heard that their treatment during detention violates many human rights. A group of us “Immigrant Family Advocates” are trying to change local policy (local law enforcement is not obligated to cooperate

with ICE), believing that ICE intervention in our communities is not only harmful to the immigrants themselves, but also to the effectiveness of local law enforcement.

Similar things happen all over the country in the name of national security. Under current and new policies like the euphemistically-named “Secure Communities Program,” both undocumented immigrants and legal permanent residents are likely to face increasing harassment and deportations in coming years.

In a 2006 Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration, U.S. and Mexican bishops spoke of the right of individuals to migrate to support themselves or their families, and called upon us to respect the human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants. In the current world situation, they said, “the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible.” (# 35, 38-39)

As we move forward in 2010, let us seek new ways to demonstrate love for our immigrant brothers and sisters, and see whether, in so doing, our own feelings of exile are transformed into new life.

“It is in giving that we receive” (Prayer of Saint Francis).

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

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