

# Reject ‘inflammatory rhetoric’ on immigration

SAN FRANCISCO – Look past the “inflammatory rhetoric” of the immigration debate to the root of the issue, urged Jesuit Father Stephen Privett, president of the University of San Francisco, in a Feb. 27 lecture at St. Rita Parish in Fairfax.

“We will never resolve the issue of immigration if we do not address its underlying cause – poverty,” said Father Privett, the second speaker in a parish Lenten series based on Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical, “*Populorum Progressio*” (“The Progress of Peoples”).

While the encyclical “does not offer us a specific set of guidelines” for dealing with immigration challenges, he said, it does “lay down some central principles and fundamental considerations that should guide our deliberations and discussions.”

Father Privett acknowledged that the debate is heated, but said Catholics should remember their faith must take into account scriptural insistence on the “radical interconnectedness” of human beings.

This “central theme of Scripture in its repeated affirmations that we are all ‘one body in Christ,’” he said, should refocus the dialogue from one geared toward legal or national security issues to one viewed “through the lens of human need.”

“When we celebrate Eucharist – one bread, one cup – we anticipate in sign and sacrament a world where all are welcomed at the same table,” the Jesuit said.

In addition to “*Populorum Progressio*” and the sacraments, the Bible provides ample guidance on how the church should address immigration, he added. “After the command to worship the one God, no command is more frequently repeated in the Hebrew Bible than the reminder to care for the stranger or resident alien in our midst,” Father Privett said.

He reminded his audience that the conveniences of modern life are out of reach for much of the global population: “If you keep your food in a fridge, your clothes in a

closet and have a roof over your head and sleep in bed, you are wealthier than 75 percent of the world.”

The perception that immigrants come to this country for handouts fails to grasp the larger picture of systemic poverty in developing countries, he continued.

“Imagine 2.8 billion people for whom tonight’s simple dinner would be a banquet of unimaginable elegance – people whose only dream, whose single hope is something to eat,” said Father Privett, alluding to a meal of soup for participants that preceded the lecture.

An important step, he emphasized, is to welcome immigrants into parish life. He related the story of a young mother from Zaire who felt like an unwanted outsider because of language barriers when she tried to find fellow Catholics with whom to worship. Feeling this type of cultural rejection, said Father Privett, can lead new immigrants to leave the church altogether.

Father Privett encouraged his audience to treat the poor, the hungry and the sick as if they were Christ. Quoting Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, he said Catholics should help “not because these people remind us of Christ ... but because they are Christ.”

“I think that one could argue from the Catholic perspective that immigrants are not ‘the problem’; rather they are the objects of special concern,” the priest said.

“The ‘problem’ is poverty and those other cataclysmic events – war, famine, natural disaster – that forcibly dislocate people,” he added. “Or, the ‘problem’ is the appropriate regulation of borders. More unsettling, the ‘problem’ may well be those of us who are not able to see ourselves in the least of our brothers and sisters and, therefore, (are) unable to construct appropriately humane and compassionate policies.”