

The Church's Beacon Shines Brightly

An article in last weekend's New York Times dramatized the victimization of foreigners living in our country without proper documentation and the frenzied, all out effort of some to capture and prosecute them as criminals. Pastors across the country – including our own Archdiocese – tell of raids upon young immigrants who are simply seeking work in order to take care of their families' most basic needs. As elections here approach, unfortunately public opinion and office-holders are pushing law enforcement officials to take draconian action harmful both to struggling workers and, often, to the local American communities involved.

Case in point: Pottsville, Iowa.

On May 12 of this year, in a scene that could be mistaken for a military operation, dozens of armed immigration officers, backed up by helicopters overhead, raided a food processing plant early in the morning and "captured" nearly 400 simple, hardworking and unarmed Mexicans. The majority has been in the community for years, active in their churches and schools and law-abiding, save for an immigration law which virtually all legislators agree is in need of radical overhaul.

Most are still in jail facing deportation. Mothers of children were "compassionately" released and placed under virtual house arrest, their ankles bound with electronic bracelets to monitor their movement. The company in question has had to cease operations.

In no time, dozens of family members rushed panic-stricken to the local Church of St. Bridget for sanctuary and for days were kept out of touch with their loved ones. They sought protection and aid in the form of food, legal advice and spiritual solace. The New York Times joined in telling their sorry tale: "The beacon of the Roman Catholic Church to immigrants has rarely shone more brightly." Parishioners of St. Bridget's (possibly remembering their own ancestors' straits in the new land) and other local churches have come to the rescue with assistance of every kind, from both private individuals and local businesses.

I write this soon after reading this distressing news story, and do so on the Sunday of the parable of the sower scattering seed – a metaphor for the word of God. Some of the seed fell on rocky, hardened ground and bore no fruit. I know that some of our Catholic faithful who read this have hardened their opinion – I would say their hearts – to a Christian view of this woeful, deplorable situation.

Dare we look at these human beings as made in the image and likeness of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ? Dare we look at them, in other words, with and through the eyes of Christ for whom no one is illegal, no one alien, no one a criminal who labors honestly to feed his family?

Neither I, nor the Church, endorse illegal immigration. To do so would undermine the integrity of the rule of law and could seriously damage migrants themselves because of the potential for family separation, exploitation and physical risks. The Church does, however, stand with undocumented immigrants. This position is long-held, and has always been associated with the welfare of the family.

The Church's solidarity with immigrants, regardless of their legal status, should come as no surprise to those familiar with the teachings of our Church. The two great pillars of Catholic social teaching are the dignity of the human person and the welfare of the family. Immigration is intimately connected with both, and so necessarily demands our attention.

Yes, we Americans are and must be law-abiding – how rightly proud we are of that. But when hard and unjust immigration laws fly in the face of human life's basic dignity, shouldn't our energies be directed toward those we have elected to bring justice to the poor and oppressed, rather than conducting manhunts? This is the justice that Jesus called for, that He still calls for through His Church, a justice that reflects the dignity of those who live and work in poverty while still maintaining a sense of law and order.

Some point to crimes committed by these "aliens," overlooking the fact that the overwhelming majority of them are law abiding. And it might be eye-opening to look at the inner-city, 19th and 20th century records of our own ancestors, European immigrants, for a good view of wanton violence.

During his visit this spring to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged our nation's bishops to "continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home." The bishops can and should foster this attitude, but it is the responsibility of us all to embrace it if hearts and minds are to be changed.

Not so long ago, I was an opinioned supporter of capital punishment. Somehow, by the grace of God I might presume, my mind, my heart, was changed as I heard Pope John Paul speak in St. Louis in 1999: "... the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil," he said. "Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

I am not so sure that anyone's opinion will be changed as a result of these thoughts on our Church. What I am certain of is that I will receive some very angry letters very quickly. Be it known that it will be a while before I get to read them; I will be at World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia. Comfortable lodgings, ample food, passport and all documentation firmly in hand, thankfully.

But for the grace of God it could be otherwise.