

We Hear You

The Catholic Review

I am most grateful to Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, who has given me permission to reprint a recent article of his. Given its length, the second part will appear next week. I am very well aware of the contentious nature of this issue among our people. I hope that Archbishop Gomez' distinctive approach would be helpful in advancing the discussion.

Our political debate about immigration in America frustrates me. Often, I think we are just talking around the edges of the real issues.

Both sides of this argument are inspired by a beautiful, patriotic idea of America's history and values. But, lately, I've been starting to wonder: What America are we really talking about?

America is changing, and has been for a long time. The forces of globalization are changing our economy and forcing us to rethink the scope and purpose of our government. Threats from outside enemies are changing our sense of national sovereignty.

America is changing on the inside, too.

Our culture is changing. We have a legal structure that allows, and even pays for, the killing of babies in the womb. Our courts and legislatures are redefining the natural institutions of marriage and the family. We have an elite culture - in government, the media and academia - that is openly hostile to religious faith.

America is becoming a fundamentally different country. It is time for all of us to recognize this - no matter what our position is on the political issue of immigration.

We need to recognize that immigration is part of a larger set of questions about our national identity and destiny. What is America? What does it mean to be an American? Who are we as a people, and where are we heading as a country? What will the “next America” look like?

As Catholics who are faithful citizens in America, we have to answer these questions within a larger frame of reference. As Catholics, we have to always remember that there is more to the life of any nation than the demands of the moment in politics, economics and culture. We have to consider all of those demands and the debates about them in light of God’s plan for the nations.

This is a big challenge for us in this culture. Our culture pushes us to “privatize” our faith, to separate our faith from our life in society. We always have to resist that temptation. We are called to live our faith in our businesses, homes and communities, and in our participation in public life.

That means we have to bring a Catholic faith perspective to this debate about immigration. We cannot just think about this issue as Democrats or Republicans or as liberals or conservatives.

I think we all know the teachings of our Church on immigration. What we need to understand better is how to see immigration in light of America’s history and purpose, as seen through the perspective of our Catholic faith. When we understand immigration from this perspective, we can see that immigration is not a problem for America. It’s an opportunity. Immigration is a key to our American renewal.

One of the problems we have today is that we have lost the sense of America’s national “story.” If our people know our history at all, what they know is incomplete.

And when we don't know the whole story, we end up with the wrong assumptions about American identity and culture.

Our National 'Story'

The American story that most of us know is set in New England. It's the story of the pilgrims and the Mayflower, the first Thanksgiving and John Winthrop's sermon about a "city upon a hill."

It's the story of great men like Washington, Jefferson and Madison. It's the story of great documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

It's a beautiful story. It's also true. Every American should know these characters and the ideals and principles they fought for. From this story we learn that our American identity and culture are rooted in essentially Christian beliefs about the dignity of the human person.

But the story of the Founding Fathers and the truths they held to be self-evident is not the whole story about America.

The rest of the story starts more than a century before the pilgrims. It starts in the 1520s in Florida and in the 1540s here in California.

It is the story not of colonial settlement and political and economic opportunity. It's the story of exploration and evangelization. This story is not Anglo-Protestant, but Hispanic-Catholic. It is centered, not in New England, but in "Nueva España" - New Spain - at opposite corners of the continent.

From this story we learn that before this land had a name its inhabitants were being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The people of this land were called Christians before they were called Americans. And they were called this name in the Spanish,

French and English tongues.

From this history, we learn that long before the Boston Tea Party, Catholic missionaries were celebrating the holy Mass on the soil of this continent. Catholics founded America's oldest settlement in St. Augustine, Fla., in 1565.

Immigrant missionaries were naming this continent's rivers and mountains and territories for saints, sacraments and articles of the faith.

We take these names for granted now. But our American geography testifies that our nation was born from an encounter with Jesus Christ: Sacramento ("Holy Sacrament"), Las Cruces ("the Cross"), Corpus Christi ("Body of Christ"), even the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, which were named for the precious blood of Christ.

The 19th-century historian John Gilmary Shea said it beautifully. Before there were houses in this land, there were altars: "Mass was said to hallow the land and draw down the blessing of heaven before the first step was taken to rear a human habitation. The altar was older than the hearth."

The Missing Piece of American History

This is the missing piece of American history. And today, more than ever, we need to know this heritage of holiness and service - especially as American Catholics. Along with Washington and Jefferson, we need to know the stories of these great apostles of America.

We should know the stories of people like Venerable Antonio Margil. He was a Franciscan priest who left his homeland in Spain to come to the New World in 1683. He told his mother he was coming here because "millions of souls (were) lost for want of priests to dispel the darkness of unbelief."

People used to call him “the Flying Padre.” He traveled 40 or 50 miles every day, walking barefoot.

He was a priest of great courage and love. He escaped death many times at the hands of the native peoples he came to evangelize.

I came to know about Fray Antonio when I was the archbishop of San Antonio. He preached there in 1719-1720 and founded the San José Mission there. He used to talk about San Antonio as the center of the evangelization of America. He said: “San Antonio ... will be the headquarters of all the missions which God our Lord will establish ... that in his good time all of this New World may be converted to his holy Catholic faith.”

This is the real reason for America, when we consider our history in light of God’s plan for the nations. America is intended to be a place of encounter with the living Jesus Christ.

This was the motivation of the missionaries who came here first. America’s national character and spirit are deeply marked by the Gospel values they brought to this land. These values are what make the founding documents of our government so special.

Although founded by Christians, America has become home to an amazing diversity of cultures, religions and ways of life. This diversity flourishes precisely because our nation’s founders had a Christian vision of the human person, freedom and truth.