**Reflections March, 2024 Vol 46 No 4**

**Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration**

**James J. Bacik**

As we proceed through the presidential election campaign, polls show that immigration remains the biggest concern of voters. Let us examine this vexing complex issue in the light of Catholic Social Teaching. British biographer of Pope Francis, Austen Ivereigh published an article in the March 2023 issue of *Commonweal* entitled “From Strangers to Siblings,” arguing that Francis has put immigration at the center of his Petrine ministry, acting as the greatest advocate for migrants and refugees on the world stage. As a son of Italian emigrees who moved to Buenos Aires in the 1930s, he has firsthand knowledge of the challenges facing immigrants and as the leader of a worldchurch, he is well aware of the enormity of the current crisis with some 70 million persons seeking a new home. More fundamentally, according to Ivereigh, Francis recognizes that immigration presents the great challenge of our time to live the call of Christ to be merciful to the stranger.

Noting that Pope Francis has not written a specific encyclical on immigration, Ivereigh points out that this topic runs through the pope’s official teaching. For instance, in *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), he calls countries to a “generous openness” that will create “new rich forms of diversity.” In *Care for Our Common Home* (2015), he urges collective global action to care for immigrants forced to flee environmental degradation. In *The Joy of Love* (2016), he stresses the traumatic impact of migration on family life. In addition, Francis has issued messages each year on the annual World Day of Migrants and Refugees. For example, his May 11, 2023 message insisted that citizens should be free to stay in their homeland and enjoy a life of dignity and peace.

Pope Francis has consistently backed up his words with actions. His first visit outside Rome was to the tiny island Lampedusa off the coast of Sicily where he honored immigrants from Africa who died crossing the Mediterranean trying to find a better life in Europe. In 2018, Francis visited a squalid refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece where he befriended a family of Syrian refugees and flew them and nine other Muslim refugees on the papal plane to Rome where they have been helped to build a new life. When the pope visited Mexico and the United States in 2016, he celebrated Mass near the southern border where he called forced migration a “human tragedy” and lauded “prophets of mercy” who are on the front lines accompanying migrants. In his homily he identified poverty, violence and drug trafficking as root causes of migration from Central America to the U.S.. He concluded his homily on a hopeful note: There is still a “way out” and “time to implore the mercy of God.”

In his 2022 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis invites Christians to reflect on the immigration crisis in light of the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37). He presents the parable in the context of consistent biblical teaching. For example, in the book of Exodus, God commands the Israelites: “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex 22:21). The New Testament expands the point: ”Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). In the parable the priest and Levite who held prominent social positions did not take time to notice or help the injured man. On the other hand, the Samaritan, a despised unclean foreigner, put aside his own needs and desires and gave his time and money to care for the victim, a complete stranger. With Francis, we should note that Jesus did not answer the question who is my neighbor by distinguishing among various classes or groups. Rather, he calls us to act as a good neighbor toward all others who share our humanity and belong to God’s family (n 81). At this point in his exposition of the parable, Pope Francis directs us to Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (25: 35). Today, when we welcome uprooted immigrants, we are welcoming Christ himself (n 84).

In a section in *Fratelli tutti*, on “Borders and Their Limits,” Pope Francis argues that persons living in countries where a dignified life is impossible have a right to seek a home where they can meet the basic needs of their families and can find personal fulfillment. To meet the rights of immigrants, we need societies and countries that accept and integrate immigrants making a new home, while preserving their own cultural and religious identity (n 129). The pope offers some concrete proposals for integrating migrants: simplify granting of visas; provide equitable access to the justice system and educational opportunities; and open up the possibility of employment (n 131). Citing the example of Latino immigration to the U.S., Francis insists that the process can be mutually enriching as both cultures expand their outlook and learn from each other (n 134). Finally, in the midst of the “dark clouds” that hover over the immigration crisis, Pope Francis urges us to advance along “new paths of hope” that lift our spirits and alert us to the seeds of goodness, truth, justice and love that God continues to sow in our human family (n 54-55).

Turning specifically to the United States, the American bishops have periodically addressed the immigration challenges facing our country, including a recent critique of the 2024 Senate bipartisan proposal that was eventually rejected. In 2000, the bishops published a pastoral statement “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity” that dealt with the large number of new immigrants coming to the U.S. from Latin America and all over the world. Under the heading of a “A Call to Conversion,” the bishops confessed that too often parishes have not met the spiritual and institutional needs of the new immigrants causing some of them to leave the Church. They suggest that this failure has occurred, in part, because so many American Catholics have forgotten their own immigrant history when the Church welcomed and assisted their ancestors to make it socially, economically and politically in their new country, despite the nativist prejudice. To improve ministry to the new immigrants, the Church “requires a profound conversion in spirit and in its institutions“ to promote genuine solidarity among diverse members of the Body of Christ (p 30).

Under the heading “A Call to Communion,” the bishops committed themselves to overcoming the ignorance and fear that hinder us from genuinely welcoming immigrants and to promoting a fruitful communion that celebrates the unity in diversity of the one family of God. Recognizing that immigrants experience the Church’s welcome most personally in the local parish, the bishops made some suggestions for more effective ministry (pp 43-49). We must remember that immigrants have rich diverse cultures woven into their very being that deserve to be respected and better known, especially through personal encounters. Parishes should look for ways to incorporate migrants and their distinctive practices into the liturgical and devotional prayer life of the community. Pastors should empower parishioners who know the language and culture of the new immigrants to make them feel welcome and help integrate them into the parish community. Pastoral leaders can find help in meeting the social, economic, legal and educational needs of immigrants from diverse programs offered by the diocese. Parishes should pay special attention to young immigrants who often feel a tension between the traditional cultural of their parents and the new American way of life.

In a relatively brief section “The Call to Solidarity” (pp 51-54), the U.S. bishops pledged to cooperate with the bishops of a migrant’s native country to provide for a safe environment and pastoral care for migrant workers (p 51). Solidarity with migrants and refugees involves efforts to encourage the U.S. government to respect the basic human rights of all migrants with special assistance for the elderly. It also includes working in solidarity with community organizers to improve housing conditions, wages, medical care and educational opportunities for immigrants. The USCCB supports these efforts through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development which funds self-help programs for the poor, offering not a hand-out but a way out of poverty. The bishops conclude their treatment of solidarity by pledging to promote fair and equitable legislation that empowers immigrants to live the full life God intended for all people.

In 2013, the USCCB published a statement “Catholic Church’s Position on Immigration Reform” that offers some concrete proposals. Seek comprehensive reform and not “enforcement only” legislation. Establish a program that would allow foreign nationals of good character living in the U.S. to obtain lawful permanent residence with an eventual path to citizenship. Provide more family visas and reduce the waiting time for reuniting separated families. Address the real causes of migration by helping sending countries achieve sustainable economic development. Exercise the legitimate right to intercept unauthorized migrants in targeted, proportional, and humane ways while keeping out traffickers, smugglers and terrorists.

Most recently on February 6, 2024, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, chair of the Bishop’s Committee on Migrants sent a letter addressed to Leaders Schumer and McConnell expressing the views of the USCCB on the bipartisan proposal for immigration reform under discussion that was eventually rejected after former President Trump publicly opposed it for political reasons. Bishop Seitz, who ministers personally to migrants in his diocese, made it clear that the American bishops fully support bipartisan efforts to reform our immigration system, but are not taking a position on the proposed legislation as a whole. Seitz said the bishops believe the current effort to make sweeping changes in immigration law is “flawed both in terms of substance and form.” Rather than sustainably reducing immigration to the U.S. – Mexico border, this bill would undermine due process and “pave the way” for “life-threatening harm” to vulnerable people seeking humanitarian protection in the United States. More specifically, it would severely limit access to asylum, making it more difficult to prove claims of dangerous threats in their homeland. Furthermore, it would establish an “expulsion authority” that could be harmful, arbitrary, and counter-productive.

The letter which was copied to all senators also noted some positive provisions in the bill that the bishops continue to support: opportunities for family reunification; employment-based immigration; and assistance for vulnerable children. Bishop Seitz concluded his letter, “A transparent, well-informed, bicameral and truly bipartisan approach is urgently needed and my brother bishops and I remain committed to helping you achieve it.” As our nation seeks comprehensive immigration reform, Catholic Social Teaching remains a valuable resource, prompting us to seek solutions that are just, compassionate and loving.