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## **‘They’ Are ‘Us’** **The Church and Immigrants**

By Donald Kerwin

**C**atholic social teaching calls us to identify with newcomers, who together with those long settled enjoy a litany of rights based on our common human dignity. Migrants serve as the church’s analogy for itself (a pilgrim church) and for the human condition (a pilgrim people). They recall our ancient heritage of exodus and exile, the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt and our evangelical history beginning with St. Paul. We oppose speaking of migrants in “us or them” terms because, in the Catholic view, “we” are “them,” and “they” are “us.” We identify with “strangers” as our brothers and sisters, and welcome them because they are an image of our God (Mt. 25:35). We try to carry on Christ’s work of “gather[ing] together into one the scattered children of God” (Jn. 11:52). In our tradition, therefore, to be anti-immigrant is to be anti-person. But nothing upsets some Catholics so much as Catholic social teaching, and the church’s teaching on newcomers admittedly presents challenges.

Immigrants have always been more or less part of the American landscape. How different are we today from earlier periods of immigration? Can you guess which era of our nation’s history has the following characteristics:

- the highest percentage of foreign-born persons in U.S. history
- immigrants from different countries than their predecessors
- immigrants who renew the United States with their hope, family values and hard work
- who endure abysmal wages and working conditions in many industries
- who strain the social service infrastructure of the communities in which they settled
- during a period of economic revolution and prosperity, but also gross poverty, disparity between the rich and the poor, and family disruption
- when the foreign-born comprise the majority of Catholics

- and nativist movements succeed in passing anti-immigrant legislation in California (much of it held unconstitutional), which paves the way for discriminatory federal legislation?

If you think I am referring to the present era, you are mistaken. I was referring to our nation's second great wave of immigration, which ran from roughly 1890 to 1920. The reason you guessed wrong is that all the characteristics I listed are true of today except the first. Although today we have the highest number of immigrants ever, in the earlier period the percentage of the population who were immigrants was larger.

The foreign-born comprised nearly 15 percent of the U.S. population at the turn of the 20th century. At present, more than 28 million foreign-born persons comprise 10 percent of our nation. But in other ways, the two eras are quite similar. Unlike their predecessors, who came from northern and western Europe, the immigrants of the period 1890 to 1920 came primarily from southern and eastern Europe. Likewise, current immigrants come from places like their predecessors—in descending order from Mexico, China, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, El Salvador, Korea, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia and other countries.

In 1890, the fruits of industrialization were unevenly distributed; an estimated 11 million of the nation's 12.5 million families earned less than \$380 a year. Similarly, our nation's current prosperity, spurred by the information age, has not trickled down to the poor. Over the last 25 years, the wages of the top 20 percent of earners has increased 44 percent, while those of the bottom 20 percent have decreased in real dollars. Twenty-five percent of wage-earners earn \$8 or less an hour. Nearly 100 years after Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, immigrants still labor in subhuman conditions in meatpacking plants, as well as in poultry processing, agricultural, garment, restaurant, hotel and various service sector jobs.

From 1880 to 1926, the U.S. Catholic population grew from 7.34 million to 18.6 million persons, with an estimated 75 percent of Catholics in 1920 foreign born. Although precise figures are not available, immigrants and their families almost certainly comprise the majority of Catholics in the United States today.

Discrimination and anti-immigrant feeling in California led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, restrictions on Japanese immigration in 1907, and finally national-origins quota legislation in 1924. In 1994 Californians voted in favor of Proposition 187—the so-called "Save Our State" initiative—which would have barred undocumented children from attending public school, required state employees to inform on the undocumented and denied a range of benefits to those suspected of being "illegal." In 1996, Congress passed immigration and welfare reform legislation, which has had a calamitous impact on immigrant families and communities, as detailed in several reports by my agency, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network.

Historically, anti-Catholic bigotry has characterized the nativist movement in the United States. The cartoons of Thomas Nast depicted Irishmen with simian features. In his most infamous drawing, bishops crawled like crocodiles out of New York harbor to attack the United States as their followers led away the Statue of Liberty. The secret oaths and platforms of groups like the American Protective Association and Ku Klux Klan were virulently anti-Catholic.

The nativists of today range from the explicit hate groups tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center to more mainstream restrictionists. Despite their differences, these groups invariably see “their” country, states and communities under siege, view themselves at “demographic war” with newcomers and believe that immigrants—by virtue of their undocumented status—forfeit their civil and human rights. These views, of course, could not be more inimical to the Catholic tradition. It should therefore come as little surprise that Catholic immigration initiatives have recently been the target of anti-immigrant protests. In Long Island, for example, the Sachem Quality of Life Organization, some of whose members refer to themselves as Catholics Against Treason, has spearheaded the opposition to a proposed Catholic Charities center for day laborers.

Catholic teaching requires effective action. It has never been enough to think highly of newcomers; we must also welcome and defend them. In response to our nation’s last great wave of immigration, the church created or dramatically expanded all the Catholic institutions we now take for granted. The number of parochial schools grew from 2,246 with 405,234 students in 1880, to 5,687 with 1.54 million students in 1916. By 1910, 285 Catholic orphanages cared for 51,938 children. Catholic hospitals grew in number from 75 to 400 between 1872 and 1910. National parishes thrived, comprising 30 percent of all parishes from 1880 to 1930. In 1916, 49 percent of Catholics attended a parish that used a language other than English. By 1902, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which established itself in the United States in 1845, had 428 parish branches. In the 1890’s, Catholic lay women created charitable settlement houses for immigrants. By 1915, 27 houses provided health care, education for children, English-language classes and other services for immigrants.

In the 1920’s, moreover, the National Catholic Welfare Council’s Bureau of Immigration met ships, helped immigrants through reception, provided loans, protected them from fraud, provided guidance on resettlement and arranged for their transportation and reception at their final destinations. Today the church’s ministry to our newly arrived brothers and sisters includes, for example, the 130 local Catholic legal immigration programs that my agency supports. An overlapping network helps thousands of refugees to resettle in the United States each year.

Still, as Catholics, we must continually ask ourselves whether we are doing enough. Do we have the right institutions in place, and have our existing institutions swelled to accommodate the needs and gifts of our nation’s newest members? Are we providing

the kind of support and community that our immigrant ancestors received from the church? Will we leave a legacy that honors our heritage and reflects our faith?

**Donald Kerwin** is the chief operating officer of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., in Washington, D.C.