

What I Learned After 25 Years
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I didn't really want to work in the Catholic Migration Office. I was a very happy parish priest for nine years already and, considering the fact that I studied for years to be a parish priest, I didn't feel prepared for a specialized ministry. I had just finished graduate school with a shiny new Master's Degree in Counseling which I worked very hard to obtain, and I was only in my second parish assignment. Then I got the phone call.

Msgr. Anthony Bevilacqua, the Chancellor, wanted to see me. He had been my teacher in the seminary, the Director of the Catholic Migration Office, and a friend. He told me that "the Bishop wants..." me to work with him in the Catholic Migration Office on a full time basis. I was surprised and flattered, but I said "no." I had no interest in immigration and I loved being a parish priest. He gave me one of his special looks with eyebrows raised all the way up his forehead, and said: "As for working in a "job" the Bishop wants this and you promised obedience. As for not knowing about immigration, *the immigrants themselves will teach you everything you need to know.*" I began the next month.

The profound words of Cardinal Bevilacqua never left my mind. For over 25 years now I have been ministering in various capacities in the Migration Office of the Diocese and learning some of the most important lessons I could ever learn as a priest from the immigrants themselves. Here are some of the things I have learned:

- The Catholic Church stands very tall and has always done so on the issue of immigration.
- The Church views immigration as a moral issue not a political one. This has tremendous implications for what we say and do as Catholics, and what we ought to do.
- Apart from those who come here for studies, most immigrants do not really want to come here to stay. Their dream is to work hard, send money home to their children and families, and go home one day to reap the rewards of having worked hard and honestly for their families.
- Immigrants hear important things with their eyes.
- Throughout our American history, immigrants have always been blamed for every problem which exists, while most of them only work hard and want safety and security for themselves and their families like the rest of us.
- The presence of immigrants in our parishes has been the cause of constant renewal, change, and creativity in our ministry.
- Many immigrants make great sacrifices for the good of their children: leaving everything behind, often risking their lives to get here, accepting work much lower than their education qualifies them for in order to survive, and will work two and three jobs if necessary. This is not to become rich, but for the

children whose pictures they carry in their pockets that they hope to see again one day.

- Migration is a complex event involving economics, sociology, psychology and theology. Through the experience of migration immigrants are in the process of finding meaning in their lives. This is theology in practice.
- While many were not the “best” Catholics in their own country, when they come here they rediscover their faith and hold onto it as their only consolation in their struggles.
- Not every immigrant comes from poverty. In fact, the poorest of the poor cannot afford to move at all.
- Immigrants do not compete with Americans for jobs, they compete with other immigrants.

These are only some of the lessons I have learned. I will write about others in the future. For now, let me explain some of these.

The Catholic Church’s position is based on moral considerations. Pope John Paul II once said: “The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership in the human family.” (October 1985) The Church does not ask first if a person is legal or illegal but rather looks at the immigrant as a human person. This is how the Church looks at everyone.

Therefore we believe that it is morally wrong for families to be separated because they cannot survive living together in their own country. It is morally wrong for people to die everyday in the desert because there are no laws available to allow people to come to work for employers who seek them. It is wrong to imprison asylum seekers without due process of law. It is wrong to prevent family members from joining each other because of tremendous multi-year backlogs in paper processing by a broken immigration system. It is morally wrong to force people to live in fear and hiding while using their labor openly without fear of punishment for the employer. It is wrong to continue to allow people to use their life’s savings to be smuggled into the US by unscrupulous trafficking. It is wrong to continue to allow people to profit from undocumented immigrants by posing as attorneys, selling them false and worthless documents, and disappearing soon thereafter. It is wrong for landlords to allow immigrants to live in horrendous conditions because they know that the immigrants are too scared to report them. The human face of the immigration debate turns the issue inside out.

For those who think that immigration is a law and order problem, I can assure you that every single undocumented immigrant would give anything to be here legally if our laws could only be reformed enough to address the human situation of immigration not just the political situation. This includes addressing the root causes of immigration as well as the situation here in the United States. People have a right to live in dignity in the place where they were born.

For those who see immigration as an economic problem, it is important to know that undocumented immigrants alone have contributed over \$ 7 billion dollars into the Social Security system and over \$ 1 billion more into Medicare and they will not see one penny of this money. Yes, many pay taxes. And the money which they send home each year is often more than our government's foreign aid programs. Mexico alone in 2005 received over \$ 18 billion dollars from immigrants here. This money has taken care of children and the elderly and revived many local communities more than local government social service programs can do by themselves. (UN Dept. of Public Information).

However, we must be clear. The Catholic Church strongly opposes the breaking of law and the illegal entry of people into our country except for reasons of survival. The Church recognizes the sacred right of every nation to control its borders and to establish laws to allow admission into the country. We are not in favor of "letting everybody in" as some people would say. But once they are here, the Church has a responsibility to assist those in need.

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict wrote that: "...charitable acts define the basic nature of the Church." When Jesus, describing the last judgment, said: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" He was making it clear that this is one of the hallmarks of a true Christian. It is a simple fact that the Church is bound to obey what the Lord teaches. I am proud to say that the Diocese of Brooklyn has made heroic efforts to obey the Lord's command. When I go to immigrant celebrations in parishes, when I hear our American priests and religious trying hard to learn and speak foreign languages, when I see our Bishops speaking out forcefully on immigration and even raising money to fund our own programs, when I watch my staff each day using all their talents and professional training to serve immigrants with the best we can offer, when I travel around the country giving speeches or attending meetings and I see how much respect there is for Brooklyn's immigrant ministry from every corner, then I am more and more convinced that we are truly obeying the Lord's command to welcome the stranger. Bishop Daily used to like to quote the Lord when He said: "By their fruits you will know them."

As the Congress of the United States prepares to take on the issue of immigration reform, it is important to understand the debate as a Catholic should. Many things will be said about national security and terrorism protection, but the real debate on these issues concerns intelligence issues and defense matters, not the thousands of people who work here because we need them, or the thousands who want to be with their families again, or the thousands who are fleeing hunger, oppression and violence in their own countries to live in dignity and freedom. Immigration is not a national security issue. It is part and parcel of our American history. It is about people like those in almost every American family who came here only to provide a better existence for themselves and their children.

Cardinal Bevilacqua was right again. I have learned many things from the immigrants themselves and I take great comfort in knowing that I am obeying what is asked of me. I believe that God's plan includes those who risk it all to leave their homelands, and I believe that His plan also includes the years of service I have been privileged to offer those who come here.
