

# Advent Reflection Guide 2022



## *Light in Darkness*

Practicing Welcome in the CLINIC Network



CATHOLIC LEGAL  
IMMIGRATION  
NETWORK, INC.





# Introduction

***“As in the practice of Advent, we look for the light to carry us through.”***

Dear Friends,

At this time of year, as the days grow shorter and nights longer, the season of Advent allows us a time to watch and long for light in darkness. According to the Christian tradition in which the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., or CLINIC, was founded, we light a new candle each of the four Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas to represent the light growing brighter as we wait in hope for the birth of the Christ-child — our “Emmanuel,” the God of love coming to dwell among us.

Those who work with and accompany immigrants in the United States are well aware of the darkness all around — the challenges facing immigrant families who suffer long visa delays and are separated, who lack legal counsel and are confused and afraid, who await deportation back to places from which they’ve fled for their lives. Like the lengthening nights, the hardship can seem to be all-encompassing.

But, as in the practice of Advent, we look for the light to carry us through. In a dark room, a tiny light draws all eyes. The victories, joys and resilience of the immigrant families in our midst are powerful reminders of why we put our faith in the triumph of love and justice. When a family member receives a green card, when parents and children are reunited, when a newly licensed immigrant can drive to work without fear of deportation — these moments of hope are like flames that burn brightly to guide us forward.

During Advent, Christians prepare to welcome the light of the world through daily practices of prayer, reflection and actions of love. Though they come from diverse faith traditions, the members of the CLINIC network take up the holy work of welcome every day; their day-to-day practices serve as beacons of light in a world that so often seeks to exclude. This Advent, we will showcase four affiliate partners in their work of practicing welcome, highlighting the ways that, through their work, they are witnessing to the coming of the kingdom of God.

We wish you a blessed Advent and holiday season.

With joy,

**Anna Gallagher**  
**CLINIC Executive Director**

# WEEK 1

## Staying Awake

***“The night is advanced, the day is at hand.” – Romans 13: 12***

“Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.” These words greet us on the first Sunday of Advent. We are invited to consider how we can remain always prepared to usher in God’s reign of justice and peace.

Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center in El Paso, Texas, was founded in 1987 to respond to the needs of Central American immigrants seeking refuge across the border. For 35 years, Las Americas has provided legal assistance for low-income immigrants and engaged in advocacy for human rights.

Marisa Limón Garza, executive director at Las Americas, reflected on what it means to “remain awake” as an organization working at the border. “Organizations situated at the border cannot look away from the injustice of U.S. immigration policies. We have to be ready for whatever comes,” she said.

Given the constant changes in border policy and the ever-present need of migrants, Christina Garcia, deputy director at Las Americas, remarked that staying prepared is a juggling act. It requires constantly reflecting on their capacity, resources, and where they can best leverage what they have to serve the community.

“We are always asking ourselves, in this particular moment, how are we uniquely equipped to help a given immigrant community or situation?” Garcia reflected. “How are we being invited to act?”

Limón Garza gave a recent example of when Las Americas responded to an unexpected need. In late September, a group of migrants who had recently crossed the border into a neighboring county from El Paso were shot at by two U.S. citizen brothers. One man was killed, another woman critically wounded. Several of the surviving migrants were taken into ICE custody and were detained.

In the following weeks, Las Americas staff began working on behalf of the migrants who were victims of this crime and their families. “We consider this a hate crime. Given our mission and our background working with victims of crime, we felt it was our role to stand in solidarity and accompany these migrants and their families,” said Limón Garza.

Las Americas staff fielded calls from family members of the deceased man and those who remained in detention for almost four weeks. They extended help and comfort where possible. Working together with the Mexican consulate, they supported the family of the deceased as they worked to repatriate their loved one’s remains across the border. They fought for the release of the detained migrants who were victims of the crime and continue to make sure they find the healing and assistance they need.

“The mother of one of the young men who was shot at and was detained called us and asked, ‘Is my son safe? Is he getting enough to eat in detention?’” Limón Garza recounted. “Our legal assistant, who is working with the woman’s son, and who is a mother herself, told her that she would tell the young man to ‘Eat up, your mother says so.’”

“This story represents an example of the best of Las Americas — convening in real time, using our community connections and resources to talk to the right people and take the right steps to advocate for the vulnerable,” said Limón Garza. “Even in these darkest spaces, we find hope in that we’re still human with each other. We hold space for suffering, and we speak to the humanity and dignity of the vulnerable. We hold out hope that migrants will get the healing and justice that they need.”



## *Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center*

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### *Questions For Reflection:*

- Through what practices can you remain “awake” to God’s work in your life?
- How can you practice being “always prepared” to welcome God in the migrant or stranger?

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## WEEK 2

# A Voice in the Desert

***“A voice of one crying out in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” - Isaiah 40: 3***

In the second Sunday of Advent, we hear John the Baptist’s jarring words, “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It is an invitation to step back and turn inward, to examine our practices and our hearts.

Pastor Zach Szmara is the founder and director of Immigrant Connection, a national network of immigration legal service offices hosted by local community churches. The first site in the network was founded in 2014 and over the last eight years the network has grown to include 23 offices across the U.S. In October, the network gathered at a conference to pause and reflect on their work.

Szmara reflects on the learning that the organization has done over the last eight years. “Immigrant Connection has always had good goals — to provide legal services to immigrants, to share the Biblical call of welcoming the stranger, to educate the community...but sometimes we let our goals and accomplishments get in the way of serving our clients,” he said. “Sometimes, for example, it was too easy to ‘lower’ immigrants, e.g., as victims, in order to ‘raise up’ the work we were doing... to speak about our friends and neighbors instead of amplifying their voices, their strength and resilience. We’ve learned how important it is to center our immigrant neighbors in every aspect of our work.”

Sera Han, Immigrant Connection’s national communications director, reflected on the transformation she’s seen in recent years when these priorities began to take shape for the network. “We now see our staff as more than two-thirds female and with good representation of people of color, and we see people feeling comfortable talking about cultural differences and the need to empower local communities,” she said.

“As people of faith, we want our services to be more than just legal assistance — we want people to feel

cared for and known. We want people to feel our care tangibly when they walk into our sites,” Szmara added.

“As people engaged in the work of immigration legal services, we want to have the humble posture of learners,” he continued. “This work is about knowing our stuff [in terms of legal assistance] but we know we can’t fix everything. We are here to share the truth about what is possible in terms of legal options and to protect people from wasting money on scammers who pose as legal aid. Ultimately, we’re here to accompany and care for our neighbors.”

In that way, Szmara says they seek to act as a prophetic “voice crying out in the wilderness” amid so much misinformation and cold bureaucracy. As they reflect on these past eight years, Szmara and Han see clearly how much Immigrant Connection has learned as a network, and how the practice of reflection and renewal is helping them become what they’ve always sought to be: a “beacon of light” uplifting the dignity of their immigrant neighbors.





## *Immigrant Connection*



### *Questions For Reflection:*

- How can you step back with your family, community, or individually to reflect on pitfalls and progress in your mission?
- How do you feel called to be a “voice crying out in the wilderness?”

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## WEEK 3

# Restoring Dignity

***“Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!” – Isaiah 35: 3-4***

In the readings for the third Sunday of Advent, we hear Jesus confirm to John the Baptist that he is the one the prophets have been longing for, the one who will bring liberation, restoration, and flourishing for God’s people.

For Fr. Jon Pedigo, Director of Advocacy and Community Engagement at Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, California, that message — the process of liberation — is what the work is all about.

Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County provides a whole range of services for immigrant families. One notable service is the pop-up “community markets” that happen weekly and are hosted by parishes and religious communities around town. At the “markets,” immigrant families can gather to share a meal, pick up groceries and fresh food, and talk to staff from various agencies that can provide help, including health care workers and free immigration legal assistance.

“The goal is relationship-building,” says Fr. Pedigo. “We collaborate with agencies around town to create these spaces where folks can build up community and find the help they need. We want to make it a relational and restorative space — neighbors helping neighbors.”

Fr. Pedigo explained that through connection to these “markets” or other services, immigrant families become aware of other avenues for community and connection, including what he called “healing circles,” or spaces where people can gather with others who speak their same language to talk about their life experiences with the guidance of a therapist. Rosary groups are another popular option where people gather to pray and support one another.

“In the work of community organizing, we have learned that internal well-being comes before and along-side external well-being. A person needs to own their own

voice and feel their inherent dignity, and then they can think about joining with others to work on common obstacles to go from merely surviving to flourishing. We address the human dimension — spiritual and emotional wellbeing — first, then scaffold on top of that to address other issues.”

He connected this work in the community with the story of the visitation of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, whose feast day is celebrated this week. “St. Juan Diego began the story saying, ‘I am nothing,’ feeling powerless, and the Virgin — who looked and spoke like him — called out his dignity,” said Fr. Pedigo. “It is a story of internal growth, of God coming to us and teaching us who we are.”

“Making change starts with restoring dignity,” Fr. Pedigo said. “We can’t miss that first step.”







## *Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County*

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### *Questions For Reflection:*

- How have you experienced the fruit of "owning your own voice?"
- What does it mean to help others restore a sense of their dignity?

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## WEEK 4

# Joy Amid Challenges

***“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” – Matthew 1: 23***

In the fourth week of Advent, we are nearing the joy of the celebration of Christmas, the birth of the Christ-child.

In Jesus’ day, those who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah expected great fanfare at his coming: wealth, power, and obvious outward signs that this is the one they had been waiting for. In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that the coming of Christ happened through the most unexpected and ordinary of circumstances — through the birth of a child to a poor young woman.

Nubia Torres is the director of Immigration Legal Services at Catholic Charities Dallas. As a fully accredited Department of Justice legal representative, she has been working in immigration law for over 10 years.

“This past year has been a difficult one,” Torres reflected. “We had several unexpected populations of people who needed our help — Afghans, Ukrainians, Venezuelans...they literally have arrived at our doors and knocked, seeking our aid. We have worked hard to find the resources to keep the door open to them, to respond to their needs.”

She remarked on how the community has rallied to welcome these unexpected arrivals. “We have really had to go the extra mile, to work together as a community to respond. It has required answering needs that are unconventional for us. We’re not just providing legal services but coordinating with others to provide food and housing as well. We want to make these families feel like they are not burdens but a blessing for our communities.”

Torres remarked how glad she was to see that some leaders in her area, including the local bishop, Rev. Edward Burns, have embraced the call to welcome the

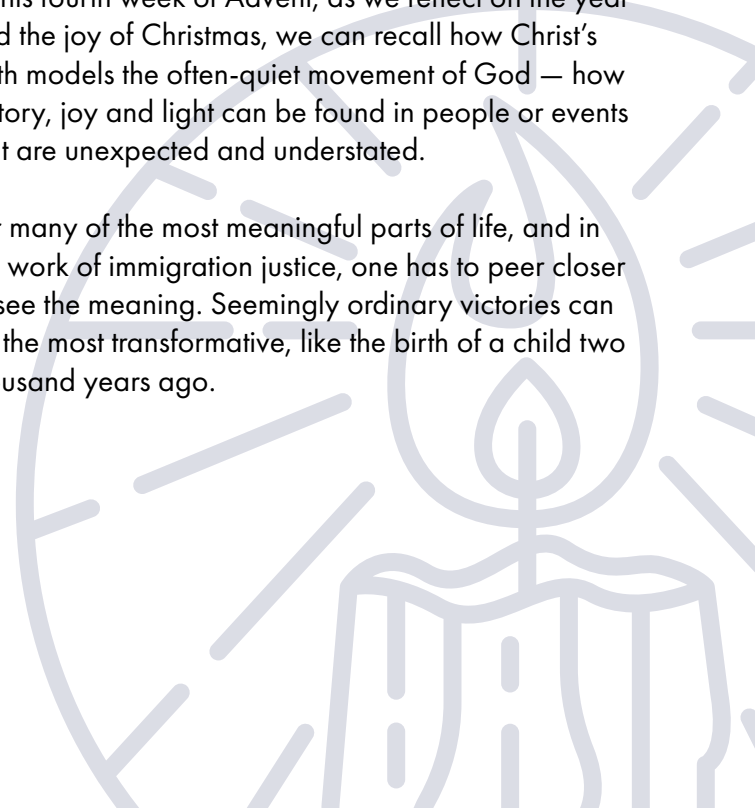
stranger amid these particularly hard circumstances. “Leaders showing with their actions what welcome looks like — that gives me hope.”

In the end, Torres noted that it is not the complex cases or the grand, few-and-far-between moments of policy breakthrough that keep her going in the work, but the small and incremental wins she sees in the immigration legal work that can make an enormous difference in the lives of her clients.

“Seeing someone able to get a driver’s license and drive without fear, or get a green card that leads to a living wage, or someone able to get citizenship... these things change people’s lives, and they drive me to keep going in the work,” says Torres. While the incremental wins can get lost in the grand scheme of broken policy and backlogs, Torres explained that these joyful victories are what propel them forward.

In this fourth week of Advent, as we reflect on the year and the joy of Christmas, we can recall how Christ’s birth models the often-quiet movement of God — how victory, joy and light can be found in people or events that are unexpected and understated.

For many of the most meaningful parts of life, and in the work of immigration justice, one has to peer closer to see the meaning. Seemingly ordinary victories can be the most transformative, like the birth of a child two thousand years ago.





Nubia Torres, left, Director of Immigration Legal Services, pictured with Most Rev. Edward Burns, Bishop of the Diocese of Dallas, center.

# Catholic Charities Dallas



## Questions For Reflection:

- What ordinary victories have inspired you in your life and work?
- What motivates you to believe in the triumph of love and justice?

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## *Acknowledgements*

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Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, El Paso, Texas • [www.las-americas.org](http://www.las-americas.org)

Immigrant Connection, based out of Logansport, Indiana • [www.icwelcome.org](http://www.icwelcome.org)

Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, California • <https://www.ccscc.org/?locale=en>

Immigration Legal Services, Catholic Charities Dallas, Texas • [www.ccdallas.org/services/immigration-legal-services](http://www.ccdallas.org/services/immigration-legal-services)