



This is the first in a series of articles by the CCK Hispanic Committee on the **Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform** which aims to reach beyond the networks of the participating national agencies, and to enlist the support of Catholic individuals and institutions in dioceses throughout the country.

Visit www.justiceforimmigrants.org for more information. Le invitamos a visitar nuestra página con regularidad, debido a que se estará actualizando constantemente con materiales, noticias relevantes y otra información que esperamos sea de su utilidad.

You, Too, Were Once Aliens

By Sr. Sandra Delgado, O.P.



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The human person is deserving of respect and dignity from the moment of conception. The Church teaches us that each person, from the tiniest embryo to the most elderly and frail of human beings, is deserving of the dignity that is due all persons. This is a truth of the Church. The alien must not be an exception to this truth. The alien among us is a human person who is also deserving of this dignity.

The great debate in our country these recent months has dealt with the treatment of the immigrant, especially the non-legal immigrant.

Who is the alien among us? The Holy Scriptures teach us that there should be no alien among us; that all should be welcomed into our communities.

“When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God.” (Lev. 19:33-34)

This passage clearly refers to the Israelites living in Egypt under a forced situation. Today’s immigrants to the U.S. are not forcibly kept in this new land. Or are they? The condition of the Israelites was one of slavery. In Leviticus they are reminded of their condition in Egypt and of their deep desire to return to their homeland. Is that the case today? Are people who are immigrating to this country forced to live in this foreign land? I would argue that they are indeed. What human person would willingly make a trip across the U.S. desert, and in some cases through other countries, merely for the adventure? How much are they giving up when they make that perilous trip and end up in a strange country with a different language and different customs? What conditions in their own countries force people to travel to a strange

land? Desperation and hopelessness.

People in many rural parts of Latin America are unable to provide the very basics of food and shelter for their families because of the lack of jobs that pay enough to buy the necessities. People are unable to make enough money to provide their children with an education much more than the required primary school thus limiting their future to one not much better than that of their parents. And the cycle continues until one can find a way to break it. Many people have found that way – to emigrate to the U.S. – the land of opportunity for all. That is what our welcome mat has always said. People from all parts of the world have found their way here legally and illegally, been able to make this home, and find those opportunities, if not for themselves, certainly for their children.

Why do the people who have crossed our borders illegally, disobeying and disregarding our laws, deserve to be treated with dignity? For the simple reason that they are people and we proclaim ourselves to be Christians.

The Church in its many documents throughout history has stood with the immigrant and the most vulnerable. Pope Pius XII in *Exsul Familia (On the Spiritual Care of the Migrant)* reaffirms that migrants have a right to a life with dignity, and therefore a right to migrate toward that end. Pope John Paul II addresses America (referring to South, Central and North America as one) about its responsibilities in *Ecclesia en America*. He states, “The Church is well aware of the problems created by this situation and is committed to spare no effort in developing her own pastoral strategy among these immigrant people, in order to help them settle in their new land and to foster a welcoming attitude among the local population, in the belief that a mutual openness will bring enrichment to all.” (65) The Holy Father also reminds us that the “Church in America must be a vigilant advocate, defending against the unjust restriction the natural right of individual persons to move freely within their own nation and from one nation to another. Attention must be called to the rights of migrants and their families and to

respect for their human dignity, even in the cases of non-legal immigration.”(236)

Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, speaks of God’s love for all humanity. In his opening statement he says, “Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbor found in the Book of Leviticus: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Mk 12:29-31) Since God has first loved us, love is now no longer a mere ‘command’; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.”

The response to this love that God has given us can only be a true and unconditional love of our neighbor. We all know that this is not an easy road to follow, but as Christians it is a necessity.

The millions of immigrants in our country who are here without documents are hearing terrible things said about them. The millions of children brought here by their parents or born of undocumented immigrants hear the discussions and arguments and they begin to question their self-worth, their security and their future. The adolescent group at the Hispanic center in Lexington asks questions and wonders about their families. Some are living with one parent in Mexico and the other here. Some have made the treacherous trip having seen terrible things. Their families are like any typical family in the U.S., struggling to make ends meet and wanting a good life for their children. Their parents are able to work at jobs that pay far better than in their home countries. They all want to experience the welcome mat that immigrants from past generations experienced.

The U.S. bishops’ document, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, challenges us to experi-



ence conversion, a change of heart and a change of attitudes so that we can indeed live the commandment that Jesus taught us – to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are reminded that there are many tensions; there is division, and alienation among the faithful in our parishes across the country that deny the unity of the human family. “Such patterns, in the words of Pope John Paul II, ‘show the urgent need for a transformation of structures and a change of mentality, which is what the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 asks of Christians and every person of good will. (Message for World Migration Day 2000, no. 1)”

The dignity of the human person will always be of importance if we keep in our hearts and minds the teaching of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mk 12:31)

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Action: Join Catholic Conference of KY’s legislative advocacy network to influence immigration public policy, www.ccky.org.

Bishops call on the local church to help newcomers integrate in ways that are respectful, that celebrate their cultures, and that are responsive to their social needs, leading to a mutual enrichment of the local church.



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The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 388,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK’s Board of Directors.