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## A Nation of Immigrants....A Church of Immigrants

The Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States issued *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* in 2003. This joint pastoral letter was written in a spirit of collegial unity and addressed the issue of immigration and migration in the context of the interdependence between neighboring nations.

*Strangers No Longer* challenged Catholics to seize the "singular opportunity to act as true neighbors and to work together to build a more just and generous immigration system."

In this document the episcopal conferences of Mexico and the United States concurred in their judgment that migration between Mexico and the U.S. is "necessary and beneficial." Nevertheless, the bishops also noted that several aspects of the migration phenomenon have been and remain problematic. In addition to the negative impact of racist and xenophobic attitudes, suffering, and even death, on the part of migrants, the abuse of human rights, and the dislocation of family members from one another are injustices that contravene the vision of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus.

Mexico and the United States share a common history, for each is a nation of immigrants. Moreover, that mutual history has been a troubled one to the extent that expansion originated with "peoples who came to conquer and to colonize these lands, displacing and eliminating entire peoples and even forcing unknown millions of persons and families from Africa to come as slaves."

The title of the pastoral, "Strangers No Longer" is taken from the Letter to the Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the

household of God ..." (Eph 2:19)

Thus, in New Testament writings the term "alien" had been more broadly applied to Christians who are viewed as "sojourners" or "resident aliens" on the earthly pilgrimage of life. But the biblical heritage at the foundation of Christianity had specifically referred to covenantal responsibilities due to aliens or sojourners understood in narrower sense of the word.

In fact, the alien was categorized in the fourfold imperative for responding to the demands of fidelity to the covenant spelled out in the legal codes of Israel, the People of the Covenant. Justice must be practiced, especially towards society's most vulnerable and defenseless members. The protection of the vulnerable and defenseless is concretely exemplified by the images of the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor.

For instance, in the Covenant Code, the Book of Exodus declares: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow and orphan. If you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. ..." (Ex 22: 20-22)

Again, the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus dictated the provision of sustenance for the marginalized in the laws governing harvests and the gleanings and tithing laws: "These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the Lord, am your God." (Lv 19:10)

In *On the Coming of the Third Millennium* (1994), Pope John Paul II identified the words and deeds of Jesus as "the fulfillment of the whole tradition of Jubilee." (TMA n.12) The social doctrine of the Church traces its roots to covenant justice in Israel, specifi-

*The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, 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 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.*

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cally "in the tradition of the jubilee year." (TMA n.13)

In Israel, the cycle of sabbatical years which culminated in a jubilee year highlighted the covenantal responsibilities of the people of God towards the poor, the disadvantaged, and the outcast. A covenant morality assured an equitable distribution of the goods of creation for all and prohibited the advantaged from exploiting the needy and the poor for profit.

Ultimately the sovereignty of God was the foundation for a creation-covenant theology. God's merciful love called for a response of trusting faith in God's providence as well as an experiential awareness of that mercy in recalling the great redemptive acts --- the Exodus and the Sinai covenant.

*Economic Justice for All*, the 1986 pastoral letter of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, summarized that biblical tradition on justice. In its treatment of the biblical perspectives for a Christian vision of economic life, the pastoral points out that the Exodus and the Sinai covenant stand for Israel as the key saving events in the history of God's Chosen People.

The Exodus liberated the people from oppression and an alien existence in a strange land as slaves --- "By leading them out of Egypt, God created a people that was to be the Lord's very own (Jer 24:7; Hos 2:25). They were to imitate God by treating the alien and the slave in their midst as God had treated them (Ex 22; 20-22; Jer 34:8-14)." (EJ n 36)

The Sinai covenant constitutes the foundational event in the formation and identity of Israel as the people of the covenant. The Decalogue (Ex 20: 1-17), the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20: 22- 23: 33), the Holiness Code (Lv cc. 17-26), and the Deuteronomic legislation (Dt cc. 12-26) formulated the major legal codes that established the possibility of community life. Again, these codes demonstrated a special responsibility towards the most vulnerable members of society symbolized by widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land. (EJ n 36)

In particular, hospitality towards the alien or the stranger in the land was explicitly incorporated into that circle of preferential protection for the powerless and the unprotected.

In his extensive writings on the biblical concept of justice, John R. Donahue, SJ, stresses that the economic legislation in the Old Testa-

ment needs interpretation, not a literal application. Those directives need interpretation since modern socioeconomic and political conditions differ from the ancient structures in the world of the Old Testament.

Yet those changed religious and cultural worlds are still linked by certain constants: "The God who spoke long ago as one compassionate to the oppressed and vindicator of the poor remains the Lord of the Jewish and Christian heritage." The biblical charge remains, namely, that Christians live according to a vision of a "contrast society." A "contrast society" is a social order wherein concern and care for and solidarity with the disadvantaged dominate social relationships rather than power and greed.

Any standard history of the Catholic Church in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries necessarily focuses on the rise of the "Immigrant Church." Although on the national scene Catholics in general now represent an affluent, well-educated, and mainstream religious community, such has not always been the case. The great waves of Catholic immigrants during that former era --- the Irish, Germans, Italians, the Polish, French Canadians, Mexicans, Slovaks, Czechs, Ruthenians, the Portuguese --- had to withstand nativist religious prejudice and discrimination and a precarious economic status.

In his *Short History of American Catholicism*, Dr. Martin Marty succinctly identified the stigma often faced by Catholic newcomers: "One set of immigrants was most despised. They were Catholics."

We are a nation of immigrants. We are a church of immigrants. For these reasons, our historical collective memory should empathetically engage us with the present challenge of issue of immigration.

In their August 2006 pastoral statement, "Every Man and Woman is the Image of God," the Catholic bishops of Kentucky invite Catholics "to welcome the beneficial aspects of migration, to overcome every form of discrimination, injustice and contempt of the persons coming to our land, for every immigrant is the image of God."

That invitation is also a call for Catholics "to work for the just treatment in our laws of the children of God who are immigrants."

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