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JESUS AND THE UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT: A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY OF A CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

DANIEL G. GROODY, C.S.C.

The article explores the spirituality of undocumented immigrants along the U.S./Mexico border. It first examines the connection between the outer geography of the immigrant journey and the inner landscape that shapes immigrant spirituality. It then explores how this journey gives rise to the theological concept of the crucified peoples. Finally it looks at this christological concept in light of Christian mission and discipleship. As the article explores what strengthens and empowers immigrants, it also examines how the immigrant experience offers new ways of seeing some core elements of the Gospel narrative.

MORE THAN TWELVE MILLION PEOPLE live in the United States without official authorization.¹ Each year about 500,000 individuals enter

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¹ Depending on the counting method, the number of undocumented immigrants varies, ranging from seven million to twenty million. In this article I draw on the Pew Hispanic Center's research, which is based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey (CPS) and the monthly Current Population Surveys that run through January 2006. The Center defines the term "unauthorized migrant" (which I refer to above as "immigrants") to mean a "person who *resides* in the United States but who is *not* a U.S. citizen, has *not* been admitted for permanent residence, and is *not* in a set of specific authorized temporary statuses permitting longer-term residence and work" (emphases original). The report notes, "Two groups account for the vast majority of this population: (a) those who entered the country without valid documents, including people crossing the Southwestern

the country as undocumented immigrants. The vast majority of these are Mexican, totaling almost 60 percent of those who are irregular immigrants. Another 24 percent come from other Latin American countries, and the remaining from other parts of the world. Political controversies surrounding immigration continue unabated, but regardless of one's position, it is transforming not only the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the nation, but the theological, ecclesial, and spiritual as well.

Along the U.S./Mexico border, a few groups offer humanitarian aid to immigrants who make the grueling trek of 40 miles or more across deserts, mountains, and other dangerous terrain. One summer in Arizona, as temperatures reached 120 degrees, a group called the Samaritans sent volunteers to keep watch for any immigrants who might be in need or distress. When a group of 20 immigrants came walking along a dry river bed, a volunteer called out to them from a ledge on a hill and asked, "Is anybody injured?" "Do you need any food?" "Do you have any water?" Suddenly the group of immigrants stopped. Unsure of who was speaking to them, they huddled together and deliberated awhile. Then slowly the leader began walking toward the Samaritan volunteers and said, "We don't have any more food. And we only have a little bit of water. But if you are in need of it, we will share what we have with you."

This story reveals as much about the inner journey of these immigrants as it does about the outer one. The inspiration for this article emerges from my years in Hispanic ministry and conversations with Mexican immigrants in the borderlands of the American Southwest. In the course of my research in the deserts, mountains, canals, and rivers of the U.S./Mexico border, and in various apostolic settings, immigrants have shared many stories about external and internal migration. Some themes of these conversations include the immigrants' reasons for leaving their homeland, the challenges of their border-crossing, their search for dignified lives, the importance of their relationships, the spirituality that sustains them, and their views of Jesus Christ.

In all these discussions, no immigrants have ever articulated in a comprehensive, systematic way the contours of their spirituality, the shape of their Christology, or their understanding of Christian mission. In many cases the theological concepts that emerge from their narratives are inchoate and

border clandestinely; and (b) those who entered with valid visas but overstayed their visas' expiration or otherwise violated the terms of their admission. Some migrants in this estimate have legal authorization to live and work in the United States on a temporary basis. These include migrants with temporary protected status (TPS) and some migrants with unresolved asylum claims. Together they may account for as much as 10% of the estimate (Jeffrey S. Passel, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S. [Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, March 7, 2006] i-ii).

embryonic, although they emerge often out of profound faith convictions. Yet not all the immigrants I talked with were necessarily deeply spiritual or close to God. Sometimes heroic tales, deep devotion, and great virtue were mixed with tales of exploitation, infidelity, and betrayal. At other times I encountered and was intrigued by the mysterious capacity to believe in God amidst many seemingly godless situations.

My own university-based social location in the United States, however, made me honestly question whether I could make enough of a “cognitive migration” into the world of the immigrant so that I could understand it from the inside. North American academic culture is powerfully shaped by rationalist, pragmatic, logical, systematic, linear, categorical, and individualistic imperatives, while the cultural world of Mexican immigrants is generally more at home with the symbolic, the literary, the lyrical, the interpersonal, the contemplative, the intuitive, and the providential. Formulating theological concepts that do justice to the christological spirituality of these immigrants is a complicated process. My aim here is not to digress into epistemological and anthropological differences, methodological controversies, or definitions about spirituality and its role in the academy.² Rather, I intend first to revisit some of the most powerful images and narratives that have emerged in my conversations with Mexican immigrants to the United States; second, to formulate these into a provisional, constructive account of this immigrant spirituality; and third, to consider the ways in which this particular Christian spirituality gives rise to a theological vision suited to the social challenges of our own day and age.

THE JOURNEY OF THE IMMIGRANT: A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY

This contextualized, constructive account of the spirituality of undocumented Mexican immigrants to the United States begins with the immigrant journey itself and the land through which they travel. The physical terrain of the immigrant journey, the inner landscape of immigrants’ mind and spirit, and the wells of biblical imagery from which immigrants often

² Sandra Schneiders defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” Drawing on her work, but nuancing her formulation of the topic, I define spirituality as how one lives out what one most values, and Christian spirituality as how one lives out what Jesus most valued. My method is sociotheological in nature in that it uses in-depth interviews and participant-observation approaches and then brings them into dialogue with tradition and the lived experience of Christian faith. See Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: The Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1:1 (1998) 3–12, at 5–6; and “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus* 3 (2003) 163–85.

draw to express their hope in God interact in ways reminiscent of scriptural analogies in early Christian spirituality. In his Homily 27 on Numbers, about the emigration of Israel out of Egypt, Origen sees a parallel between the names of the places along Israel's sojourn and the stages of the spiritual journey.³ The third-century Christian theologian offers an allegorical interpretation of Numbers and lays out spiritual parallels to the physical geography of the Exodus. He writes, "When the soul sets out from the Egypt of this life to go to the promised land, it necessarily goes by certain roads and . . . observes certain stages that were made ready with the Father from the beginning."⁴ Origen goes on to explain how the biblical geography reveals a spiritual geography, asserting that what is chronicled on the surface as a physical journey is in fact an archetypal elaboration of the soul's journey to God. I want to suggest, in a similar way, that the topography and geography of the U.S./Mexico border has many parallels to the spiritual journey of the immigrant.⁵ In their arduous journey across a deadly border, which takes many of them through vast stretches of Latin America, Native America, and North America, immigrants speak spontaneously of a spirituality of sacrifice, a spirituality of the desert, and a spirituality of the cross.

³ Rowan A. Greer, ed., *Origen* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 245–69. I am grateful to Brian Barrett, who first introduced me to this connection between the physical and spiritual journey in patristic theology. For a critical overview of contemporary scholarship on Origen's exegetical method, with an emphasis on its moral and spiritual benefit for his audience, see Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit within Origen's Exegesis* (Boston: Brill, 2005). In Homily 27 on Numbers, Origen interprets the historical journey of Israel through the desert along two distinct but inseparable lines: (1) our moral growth in virtue, which begins at our conversion, and (2) our spiritual ascent to God, which culminates in the resurrection as our entry into the promised land. By applying Origen's method to a contemporary theology of migration, this article seeks not only to interrelate their spiritual journey to their physical journey but also to reframe the moral imagination with a view to human dignity, the challenge of making a cognitive migration in regard to "the other," and to highlight the core issue of human solidarity.

⁴ Greer, *Origen* 250.

⁵ A distinctive quality of patristic exegesis is that it is generally preached. The Church Fathers, particularly Origen, developed methods of interpreting Scripture precisely for the moral and spiritual benefit of their hearers. For contemporary introductions to patristic exegesis and its relevance for today, see Charles Kannengiesser, "Avenir des traditions fondatrices: La Christologie comme tâche au champ des études patristique," *Reserches de science religieuse* 65 (1977) 139–68; John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005); Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 2003); and Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (New York: Cambridge University, 1997).

Altar, Mexico, and the Land of Latin America: A Spirituality of Sacrifice

The cultural landscape and social fabric of Mexico, with its roots in Mesoamerica, is shaped in large part by notions of the heart and of sacrifice.⁶ For many undocumented immigrants from Latin America, a popular road to the United States begins at a staging area in Mexico about 60 miles south of the border at the town of Altar, Sonora. The name "Altar," which is spelled identically in Spanish and English, symbolizes in part the physical and emotional costs paid by many immigrants for people they love. It marks the beginning of a dangerous and difficult road on which they offer their lives for the hope of a better future for themselves and their families.

At the center of the town plaza in Altar is the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe where, before they depart, many immigrants participate in a Eucharistic celebration and pray for help, guidance, and safety. Few of them would know the work of French anthropologist and Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but his words, spoken in the Ordos Desert of China while celebrating "The Mass On the World," fuse the universal struggle for work and faith in Jesus Christ in a powerful Eucharistic metaphor that captures much of the christological essence of the immigrant narratives that follow. Chardin, who believed that all work, all striving, and all human effort are related to the consummation of all things in Jesus Christ, writes, "I . . . will make the whole world my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world."⁷

Immigrants walk or ride the 60 miles from Altar, Mexico, to the U.S./Mexico border, which in some areas is marked by a dilapidated, barbed wire fence but increasingly is sealed off by an imposing 15-foot wall. Then each shouldering 24 to 32 pounds of water and as many provisions as they can carry, the immigrants begin an arduous trek on foot across 40 miles or more of rugged and unforgiving terrain. They migrate toward a "promised land," but it is a perilous journey.⁸ The parallels of the immigrant narrative to the Exodus story are striking (Exod 13:17–17:7). The conditions of economic oppression, the burdensome yoke of poverty, and the hope of freedom lead migrants to wander through deserts or cross over bodies

⁶ Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 115–36; David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1999) 180.

⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 119–21. See also Teilhard, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Writings*, sel. and intro. Ursula King (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) 80–81.

⁸ For more on this topic see Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2008).

of water to evade border guards and to struggle to believe that they are moving toward a better future. Some will run out of food and eat from the feeding troughs of desert livestock. Others will run out of water and drink their own urine. Every day at least one will die in the desert, drown in the canals, or freeze to death in the mountains. Even by conservative estimates, thousands of immigrants have died crossing this border since 1993 when more restrictive policies were put into place.⁹

“When we started the journey,” said Mario, “the first thing we did was make the sign of the cross. We asked for protection from the snakes and from other dangers.”¹⁰ Immigrants like Mario are acutely aware that the price of providing for their families means leaving home, and that the cost of living from the heart may entail the sacrifice of their own lives. “We abandon everything,” said Gustavo, “our families, our children, and our people. I’m [migrating] more than anything for them.”¹¹ It is a sacrifice often mixed with guilt. For all their good intentions, there is often the underlying regret at not being there to see children grow up, not being able to return home for a funeral, not being there for one’s spouse. Their spirituality is first and foremost about relationships and providing for others, sometimes through their presence but often in their absence.

The physical and emotional demands of migrating are a difficult part of the journey, but they are only part of the sacrifice. Their long-term sacrifice is their labor, and the spirituality of the undocumented immigrant is grounded on work. “Nobody comes to the States for sightseeing or to get rich,” said Mario, a 15-year-old immigrant. “I’m thirsty out here in the desert, but I’m even more thirsty to find work. My family is very poor, and they depend on me. We have nothing to eat, really just beans and tortillas, and I am anxious to respond to their needs.”¹²

Immigrants face many obstacles in their journey northward, one of which is the physical barriers. A 700-mile fence symbolizes a nation’s inhospitality toward them, and, like Lazarus at the rich man’s gate

⁹ Karl Eschbach, Jacqueline Hagan, and Nestor Rodríguez, “Deaths during Undocumented Migration: Trends and Policy Implications in the New Era of Homeland Security,” *In Defense of the Alien* 26 (2003) 37–52; and United States Government Accountability Office, “GAO-06-770 Illegal Immigration: Border-Crossing Deaths Have Doubled since 1995” (August 2006), <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06770.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2009).

¹⁰ Mario, interview by author, June 29, 2004, Altar, Sonora, Mexico. All quotations of immigrants are from the author’s personal interviews in the deserts, mountains, and canals along the U.S./Mexico border, particularly in the towns of Altar and Sasabe, Sonora, Mexico, and various parts of Arizona and California. Transcripts of interviews are in the author’s personal files. In some cases the names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

¹¹ Gustavo, interview by author, June 26, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

¹² Mario, interview by author, July 14, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

(Lk 16:19–31), they will take any scrap of employment offered them, even though it is difficult, dangerous, and demanding (thus often called “3D jobs”). More than one immigrant per day will also die in the workplace—cutting North Carolina tobacco, processing Nebraska beef, chopping down trees in Colorado, welding a balcony in Florida, trimming grass at a Las Vegas golf course, or falling from scaffolding in Georgia.¹³ Immigrants go to these great lengths to offer themselves, but, even so, many find their sacrifice shunned. “We don’t understand why Americans treat us this way,” said Enrique. “Even though Americans treat us like oxen, all we want to do is work here legally. . . . Even though we want to work for them, they won’t let us. We cross over the border, but they make us out to be criminals. It’s like being poor is a crime.”¹⁴

Tohono O’odham and the Land of Native America: A Spirituality of the Desert

After leaving the town of Altar, many immigrants cross through the Tohono O’odham Indian reservation. It is a Native American territory about the size of Connecticut that spans both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, and for many years people circulated freely and crossed the border in this area without restriction. Tohono O’odham means “people of the desert”¹⁵ in the language of the indigenous people who bear that name; it is a territory that names and symbolizes much of what they experience.

The desert is a physical place with spiritual significance. No immigrant said he or she went out into this territory to get a deeper understanding of the mystical writings of St. Antony or any of the desert fathers or mothers,¹⁶ yet, like the ancient monks, immigrants discover that the desert is a place that often strips them of illusions about life, opens a place for purification, and helps them realize central truths about who they are before God. The spirituality of these migrants is shaped by the earth, by the elements, and

¹³ Immigrant deaths in the United States was the subject of an Associated Press story published March 21, 2004: http://customwire.ap.org/dynamic/stories/D/DYING_TO_WORK?SITE=LALAF&SECTION=HOME:3/21/2004. Unfortunately the link is no longer active.

¹⁴ Enrique, interview by author, June 29, 2004, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

¹⁵ Alan J. McIntyre, *The Tohono O’odham and Primeria Alta* (San Francisco: Arcadia, 2008) 9.

¹⁶ Throughout the history of the Judeo-Christian faith, the desert has been understood as a physical place with religious meaning. Often it is understood as a place of purification and testing, where one either succumbs to temptation or emerges victorious. The classic treatment of the desert spirituality is found in Athanasius, *Life of Antony* (New York: HarperOne, 2006). See also *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Collegeville, Minn.: Cistercian, 1987); and Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).

by this arid terrain. Like the geography of desert trails, this dry, spiritual territory is often diffuse and capillary, sometimes fragmentary and difficult to follow. Some say the desert teaches them how to suffer. Others say it makes them come to terms with their vulnerability. Most speak about how the desert helps them appreciate their relationships, sometimes after having taken them for granted. This desert becomes their arena of struggle, a barren territory seemingly bereft of life, except that which threatens it, like snakes, scorpions, and other wild animals and desert reptiles.

Some immigrants say the desert gives them a heightened sense of the struggle between good and evil. With temperatures sometimes exceeding 120 degrees in the shade, some refer to this territory as the “devil’s highway.”¹⁷ Others say the desert brought out their worst side, put them in touch with their own inner darkness, or brought them face to face with temptation. After a grueling journey, Caesar collapsed on the road and came within hours of dying when the Border Patrol rescued him. From his hospital bed he said:

When I was in the desert, I thought about Jesus’ temptation. It was like God was testing me in some way. . . . For me the temptation was to not trust God, to give up, to admit defeat, to allow myself to die in the desert. But I couldn’t do it. Christ went into the desert for our sakes, not his. I felt God was calling me to fight, to keep going, to suffer for my family. I did not want to let myself be conquered by death least of all. At times I wanted to just stay there in the desert and die, but then I would think about my wife and my family who need me. . . . I just kept thinking of them, and this is what gave me strength.¹⁸

Manuel had a related experience. Four days after he began his journey he was lost, standing on a roadside, and waving an empty water jug in the air. Although he started with six friends, they left him behind when he could not keep up. He said, “I was scared. I got lost and then sick, and I wondered if I would ever make it out alive.” In the midst of his weakness and vulnerability he also became more aware of the presence of God. When I asked him what he learned in the desert, he said, “I simply prayed. After my friends left me and I was out there all alone, I learned that all I have is God, and he is the one friend who will never leave me.”¹⁹

Crucifixion Thorn, U.S.A., and the Land of North America: A Spirituality of the Cross

In the course of my research in the desert, the Border Patrol allowed me into one of their surveillance facilities and showed me the cameras and

¹⁷ Louis Alberto Urrea, *The Devil’s Highway: A True Story* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

¹⁸ Cesar, interview by author, July 20, 2003, Tucson, Ariz.

¹⁹ Manuel, interview by author, June 23, 2003, Arivaca, Ariz.

other technology used to monitor the border. When looking at a wide panorama of television screens, the agents zoomed in on one region and said, “Yesterday in this spot we found three immigrants who died after crossing the border.” When I asked the name of the area, an agent replied, “It’s called Crucifixion Thorn. It’s a nature preserve that has a rare, spiny plant, like the one used to crown Jesus’ head.”²⁰ He was simply recounting a basic geographical fact, without any apparent awareness of the theological ramifications of this statement.

Many immigrants speak about Jesus as their refuge and the one who is not afraid to accompany them as they struggle to move forward. They speak about how Jesus, like many of them, faced misunderstanding, rejection, ridicule, insults, temptation, and even death. He becomes a source of hope not only as they make the demanding journey across a deadly border, but also as they establish their lives in a new land and endure the many abuses and indignities that diminish their humanity. What sticks, and pricks, and cuts, and wounds the deepest are the insults and humiliations, the fear that they are no one to anyone, that they are no more than dogs to other people. “We just want to be human, and they treat us like we are animals,” said Maria, who crossed over with a group of 40 people. “Or worse—insects!”²¹

“When we moved a little farther north from the border, we thought we were OK,” said Juan, one of Maria’s traveling companions, “but then the helicopter came.”²² “They started shining its spotlight on us, and I just stood there . . . frightened,” added Mario. “They started playing the song *La Cucaracha* [over the helicopter loudspeaker]. We were terribly insulted,” he continued.²³ “We felt worse than cockroaches . . . like we were truly being stepped on . . .,” said Margarita.²⁴ “I fell down again, and they kicked me twice or three times. I thought I wanted to die,” Maria added. “No, dear God,” she prayed, “I’ve gone through so much sacrifice to come this far. . . . I just asked God that we would be OK, that they wouldn’t hurt us even more, that they wouldn’t send us back where we came from.”²⁵

Setbacks and difficulties are frequent, but the goal of the immigrant is clear. Theirs is a journey marked often by surrender to God as they sojourn into unknown, unmarked, and unwelcoming territory: “All I can do is put myself in the hands of God and trust he will light my path,”

²⁰ Border Patrol agent, interview by author, October 18, 2004, near Calexico, Calif.

²¹ Maria, interview by author, June 28, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²² Juan, interview by author, June 28, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²³ Mario, interview by author, June 28, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²⁴ Margarita, interview by author, June 28, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²⁵ Maria, interview by author, June 28, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

said Carlos. "I do not know where I am going, or what is ahead of me, but I have to take the risks because our needs are great."²⁶

Amid the dangers that threaten their lives, some immigrants rediscover that life is not a possession or accomplishment but a gift, loaned to them (*prestado*) by a benevolent God. Immigrants have few illusions of self-sufficiency. Aware they could lose everything in a moment, some come to an increasing awareness that all they have comes from God. For some this realization gives birth to a spirituality of gratitude, which is most remarkable, given the painful dimensions of their social location. "I have come to see that one of the greatest miracles is simply that I am alive, that I exist at all," said Ricardo. "Through this whole process [of migrating], I've come to see just how beautiful life is."²⁷

IMMIGRANTS AS "CRUCIFIED PEOPLES" OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In the spirituality of the immigrants, Altar, Tohono O'odham, and Crucifixion Thorn are geographical stations on a dangerous and costly journey of sacrifice, asceticism, and the cross. These categories give us an initial description of their inner journey, but further analysis is needed in order to develop a theological interpretation of this reality. The risk of interpretation, as David Tracy notes, must be faced in trying to offer a constructive account of the rich christological images that arise from the experience of these immigrants.²⁸ But how and where do we begin? My argument is this: the spirituality that sustains Mario, Maria, Cesar, Magarita, Manuel, Gustavo, and countless other Mexican immigrants takes us beyond the anecdotal accounts of a particular group that crosses the border, because their experience names something that is more universal in scope. In recent interviews with immigrants and refugees at the borders of Slovakia/Ukraine, Malta/Libya, and Morocco/Spain, I have found similar stories that resonate with these themes.

Robert Lassalle-Klein gives us a possible clue to a more universal approach in pointing to "the crucified peoples" and "the mestizo Jesus" as two of the most promising images for formulating a "Christology grounded in the needs of a global church."²⁹ Noting that "Euro-American Christology has barely registered, much less accepted" these images, he explains how the "luminescent faith, hope, and communal solidarity" they embody

²⁶ Carlos, interview by author, July 7, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²⁷ Ricardo, interview by author, July 7, 2003, Altar, Sonora, Mexico.

²⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 103.

²⁹ Robert Lassalle-Klein, "A Postcolonial Christ," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003) 135–53, at 135–36.

“have helped desperate communities to survive in the face of overwhelming odds” at the dawn of the new millennium.³⁰ While the mestizo Jesus is certainly relevant to any discussion of Mexican immigrant spirituality (and is explored elsewhere in this issue),³¹ I will limit myself here to a discussion of the “crucified peoples.” In what follows I will argue that this image, which Lassalle-Klein correctly asserts has found broad resonance with global Christians interested in the “option for the poor,”³² is a suitable theological metaphor for speaking about the arduous journey of undocumented Mexican immigrants through Altar, Tohono O’odham, and Crucifixion Thorn.³³

Lassalle-Klein explains that this christological image was formulated in 1978 by Ignacio Ellacuría, extrapolating on a famous homily by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador.³⁴ Ellacuría understands the crucified people as “that vast portion of humankind, which is actually

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Various forms of what Virgilio Elizondo has called the “mestizo Jesus” are taken up in this issue of *Theological Studies* by Elizondo, Michael Lee, Sean Freyne, and Robert Lassalle-Klein.

³² Lassalle-Klein, “A Postcolonial Christ” 142. He cites the following examples: James H. Cone, “An African-American Perspective on the Cross and Suffering,” in *The Scandal of a Crucified World*, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 48–60; Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 81–98; Kosoke Koyama, “The Crucified Christ Challenges Human Power,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 149–62, at 156; Chung Hyun Kyung, “Who Is Jesus for Asian Women?” in *ibid.* 223–46, at 224; Salvador T. Martinez, “Jesus Christ in Popular Piety in the Philippines,” in *ibid.* 247–57; Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, “Is There a Feminist Theology of the Cross?” in *Scandal of a Crucified World* 87–98; John M. Waliggo, “African Christology in a Situation of Suffering,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991, 1995) 164–80.

³³ Jon Sobrino notes that “The crucified peoples of the Third World today are the great theological setting, the locus, in which to understand the Cross of Jesus” (Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999] 196). See also Ignacio Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos*, 2 vols., Colección latinoamericana 25–26 (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA, 2000) 1:187–218; Jon Sobrino, “La teología y el ‘Principio Liberación,’” *Revista Latinoamericana de teología* 12 (1995) 115–40; Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The El Salvadoran Martyrs and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003); Michael E. Lee, “Liberation Theology’s Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse,” *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003) 226–43; Kevin Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2006); Gioacchino Campese, “Cuantos Más: The Crucified Peoples at the U.S./Mexico Border,” in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey* 271–98; and Groody, *Border of Death*, esp. 13–39.

³⁴ Robert Lassalle-Klein, introduction to *Love That Produces Hope* xxix n. 2.

and literally crucified by natural . . . historical and personal oppressions.”³⁵ Contextualizing Ellacuría’s approach, Lassalle-Klein explains elsewhere that this Spanish Jesuit, who studied under Karl Rahner at Innsbruck from 1958 to 1962, just before Vatican II, “frames his entire theological project as a ‘theology of sign,’ his own development of Rahner’s ‘theology of symbol.’”³⁶ He adds that “the emphasis has been shifted from ‘symbol’ to ‘sign,’ in part, to cohere with the Council’s mandate to ‘the Church . . . of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel (*Gaudium et spes* 4).”³⁷

Building on this fundamental theology of sign, Ellacuría makes the remarkable assertion that the crucified peoples can be seen as the defining “sign of the times,” which perennially embodies the tragic consequences of sin and the rejection of God’s self-offer in human history. He writes:

Among so many signs always being given, some identified and others hardly perceptible, there is in every age one that is primary, in whose light we should discern and interpret all the rest. This perennial sign is the historically crucified people, who link their permanence to the ever distinct form of their crucifixion. This crucified people represents the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, who is forever being stripped of his human features by the sin of the world, who is forever being despoiled of everything by the powerful of this world, who is forever being robbed of life, especially of life.³⁸

The key idea here for my purposes is that crucifixion is not limited to biblical times, and that crucifixion can serve as a suitable metaphor, or historical sign, for the unjust human suffering in all generations. Further, the

³⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 580–604, at 580; trans. of “El pueblo crucificado, ensayo de soteriología histórica,” in Ignacio Ellacuría et al., *Cruz y Resurrección* (Mexico City: CTR, 1978) 49–82, at 49.

³⁶ Robert Lassalle-Klein, “Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol: New Proposals from the Americas,” in *Rahner beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul G. Crowley (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 87–99, at 95. Citations from Ignacio Ellacuría, *Teología política* (San Salvador: Secretariado Social Interdiocesano, 1973) esp. 9–10, 44–69; translated by John Drury as *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 15–18, 82–126; and Karl Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221–52.

³⁷ Lassalle-Klein, “Rethinking Rahner on Grace and Symbol” 95.

³⁸ Ellacuría, *Escritos teológicos* 2:133–35. The title of this article, originally published in 1980, is “Discernir el ‘Signo’ de los Tiempos.” The English translation is from Kevin F. Burke, “The Crucified People as ‘Light for the Nations’: A Reflection on Ignacio Ellacuría,” in *Rethinking Martyrdom*, ed. Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino, and Felix Wilfred, *Concilium* 2003/1 (London: SCM, 2003) 123–30, at 124.

crucified peoples of the world have been at the heart of the church's mission and the gospel message since Jesus first proclaimed the reign of God.

In this connection, Lassalle-Klein explains that Jon Sobrino appropriates the image or sign of the crucified people as the centerpiece of his two-volume Christology, following what he calls, "the fundamental methodological choice running right through Latin American Christology: to go back to Jesus in order to rethink all theological realities in terms of him."³⁹ Working carefully through the two volumes, Lassalle-Klein shows how Sobrino wants to "draw a fundamental analogy"⁴⁰ between, on the one hand, today's crucified peoples' struggle to believe and to survive amidst poverty, inequality, structural injustice, and violence, and, on the other hand, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lassalle-Klein explains that Sobrino elevates this image or sign from popular religiosity to the level of a formal theological concept: "The term *crucified peoples* is also useful and necessary language in Christology."⁴¹ Sobrino argues, "The *crucified peoples* are those who fill up in their flesh what is lacking in Christ's passion, as Paul says about himself. They are the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history." Citing the aforementioned words of Archbishop Romero to the terrorized survivors of the 1977 Aguilares massacre—"You are the image of the pierced savior"; Sobrino continues, "These words are not rhetorical, but strictly christological. They mean that in this crucified people Christ acquires a body in history and that the crucified people embody Christ in history as crucified."⁴²

Lassalle-Klein reminds us that Sobrino's language is analogical, grounded in Ellacuría's theology of sign; this allows Sobrino to argue that when followers of Jesus witness the crucifixion of the innocent, this encounter functions as a real sign drawing us into the reality of the paschal mystery ("Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" [Mt 25:40]). Sobrino then concludes that "when followers of Jesus take the crucified people down from their cross, they become a living sign for the universal church of both the coming of the Kingdom of God and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus from the dead."⁴³ Sobrino insists

³⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 266; trans. of *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura historica-teologica de Jesus de Nazaret* (San Salvador: UCA, 1991) 443.

⁴⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 254–73; Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001) 3–8; trans. of *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (Madrid: Trotta, 1999).

⁴¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 255; the Romero quotation is from his *Voz de los sin voz* (San Salvador: UCA, 1980) 208.

⁴² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 255.

⁴³ Robert Lassalle-Klein, "A Postcolonial Christ," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003) 143.

that it is not that we are literally “repeating God’s action” or “bringing the Kingdom of God,” but rather “giving signs—analogously—of the resurrection and the coming of the Kingdom.”⁴⁴ Emphasizing the connection to Ellacuría’s theology of sign, Sobrino concludes, “This is also what Ignacio Ellacuría meant when he . . . used the expression ‘taking the crucified people down from the cross’ as a formulation of the Christian mission.”⁴⁵ Building on this theology of sign, then, I would argue that migration must certainly be considered a complementary sign of the times. In some ways, immigration can be considered a more specific historical manifestation or sign of the crucified people in the ways it so often robs them of their human dignity, if not their very lives.

The reality of the journey of the immigrant today can be interpreted precisely as a way of the cross. In the process of leaving Mexico, crossing the border, and entering the United States, undocumented Mexican immigrants experience nothing short of a walk across a border of death. Even when they do not die physically, they undergo a death culturally, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. Their journey involves an economic sentencing, whereby they have to shoulder the difficult responsibilities of leaving family, home, and culture for an unknown future in the United States and the search for a job with meager wages. The Mexican immigrant experiences an agonizing movement from belonging to nonbelonging, from relational connectedness to family separation, from being to nonbeing, from life to death. Economically, undocumented Mexican immigrants experience a movement from poverty in Mexico to poverty and exploitation in the United States. Politically, they experience oppression. Legally, they are accused of trespassing. Socially, they feel marginalized. Psychologically, they undergo intense loneliness. And spiritually, they experience the agony of separation and displacement.⁴⁶ The suffering of the immigrant points not only to the reality of their personal struggles but also to the socioeconomic conditions that contribute to this suffering.

As Gioacchino Campese observes: “Immigrants are dying by the thousands in the dangerous deserts of Arizona, but, most importantly, they are being ‘crucified.’ This was the fate of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴⁷ The undocumented immigrants who cross the border also can be legitimately portrayed as a historical incarnation of Christ crucified today. They are crucified not only in their trek across the border but also in the jobs they must take, which César Chávez likewise compared to a crucifixion:

⁴⁴ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 32–33.

⁴⁷ Gioacchino Campese, “Cuantos Más 287–88.

Every time I see lettuce, that's the first thing I think of, some human being had to thin it. And it's just like being nailed to a cross. . . . [Like working with sugar beets,] that was work for an animal, not a man. Stooping and digging all day, and the beets are heavy—oh, that's brutal work. And then go home to some little place, with all those kids, and hot and dirty—that is how a man is crucified.⁴⁸

The notion of the crucified peoples, then, is analogical language for speaking about the social reality of undocumented immigrants in terms of Christian theology, a way to conceptualize what immigrants are experiencing in the contemporary world. The immigrant poor see their own story in the Jesus story, and from their story we can also reread the Jesus story. Even if they do not always see themselves as a crucified people, for many immigrants, their human and spiritual journey gives rise to a relationship with the historical Jesus that is laden with theological meaning, and their struggles and difficulties can be understood as a way of participating in the paschal mystery.⁴⁹

Moreover, what is crucial to my discussion here is that the identification with the historical Jesus that defines this spirituality, and the image of the crucified people that forms the basis for the christological concepts I have discussed above, not only describe and interpret the afflicted reality of the undocumented Mexican immigrant but also confront it. In the present case, the injustice related to such crucifixion necessitates challenging the disordered reality and policies that result in the death of so many innocent people. Lassalle-Klein insists on the importance of Sobrino's "insight that the crucified people functions for many Salvadorans as the root metaphor of a truly Christological theodicy."⁵⁰ So too, the Mexican immigrants I have considered here see in Jesus that God has taken on their human weakness, journeys with them in their anguish and distress, and even enters into the depths of hell to strengthen them as they move forward.

CHRISTIAN MISSION: TAKING THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE DOWN FROM THE CROSS

The claim that the undocumented Mexican immigrants travelling through Altar, Tohono O'odham, and Crucifixion Thorn belong to the crucified peoples of this world gives rise to a challenging understanding of Christian mission and discipleship. Building on a deeply incarnational and trinitarian view of the world, Sobrino asserts, "To do theology means,

⁴⁸ Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003) 64.

⁴⁹ Lassalle-Klein, "A Postcolonial Christ" 143.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 142.

in part, to face reality and raise it to a theological concept,” and that, to carry out this task, “theology should be honest with the real.”⁵¹

Expanding on Ellacuría’s “noetic,” “ethical,” and “praxis-oriented” acts by which intelligence comes to terms with reality,⁵² Sobrino elaborates four precise steps for apprehending and confronting historical reality. The follower of Jesus, the theologian, or anyone who wishes to deal with the historical reality of the risen Jesus today must therefore: (1) *hacerse cargo de la realidad*: immerse oneself in the midst of the presence of the risen Jesus in the historical reality of his followers today, and not just try to understand it cognitively from a distance; (2) *cargar con la realidad*: take responsibility for the ongoing crucifixion of Christ in his followers by taking the crucified people down from the cross; (3) *encargarse de la realidad*: help make real changes and achieve real transformations in the structures of historical reality that ensure the ongoing crucifixion of the risen Jesus in his followers today; and (4) *dejarse cargar por la realidad*: allow oneself to be carried along by the grace and hope at work in the lives of both the crucified peoples and those trying to take them down from their cross.⁵³

Put another way, the idea that the undocumented immigrants dying in the deserts are part of the crucified people implies that, unless we act to alleviate their suffering, we are like those who stood by and watched Jesus die on the cross. At the heart of the gospel message is the conviction that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead by his Father and has breathed on us the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and unites us as sisters and brothers under one Father. This is the root of Sobrino’s claim that we become living signs of faith in the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom of God when we take the crucified peoples of our day down from their cross. Despite our callous lack of awareness and the pervasive character of sin in the world today, God’s grace is always active, sowing seeds of forgiveness, insight, and solidarity, which are ready to yield a hundredfold harvest anytime we open ourselves to God’s constant self-offer mediated to us through the invitation to love our neighbor.

⁵¹ Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003) 13.

⁵² Ignacio Ellacuría, “Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico Latinoamericano,” *ECA Estudios Centroamericanos* 322–323 (August–September 1975) 419; and Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuría as a Human Being and a Christian: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross,” in Kevin Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Love That Produces Hope* 1–67, at 18.

⁵³ Jon Sobrino, “La teología y el ‘Principio Liberación’” 115–40. I am indebted to Gioacchino Campese, who has helped me understanding the importance of Ellacuría’s and Sobrino’s thought for interpreting the immigrant reality. See Campese, “Cuantos Más” 271–98.

From the perspective of the immigrant, we have seen that interpreting their journey as a *Via de la Cruz* can be a source of strength and consolation. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead offers them hope that they will also overcome all that threatens their lives as well, even as they surrender in trust without knowing the final or even intermediate outcome of their journey. From the perspective of the inhospitable host, taking the crucified people down from the cross begins with meeting the basic needs of immigrants for food, shelter, and employment—in short, all that is necessary to live in dignity. Some organizations like Samaritans and Humane Borders in Tuscon, Arizona, which draw their inspiration from the Gospel narrative, live out this mission by providing aid for immigrants who cross the deserts of the American Southwest. When aid workers speak about their mission as a call to “take death out of the immigration equation,” they are demonstrating that taking the crucified peoples down from the cross is a way of working for a more just and peaceful world and proclaiming in word and deed that the Kingdom of God is at hand.⁵⁴

In addition to offering direct aid to immigrants in need, however, the same christological spirituality that animates these organizations also leads them to challenge a disordered reality that creates social structures and political policies that precipitate migration in the first place. An unjust trading system, the continuing debt crisis, insufficient development aid, and especially flawed border policies are not ways of mixing faith with politics but rather serve as challenges that draw out the political implications of Christian commitment. Despite spending billions of dollars to control its border with Mexico, the U.S government has not actually reduced irregular migration.⁵⁵ It has simply diverted immigrant crossings to more dangerous areas like deserts and mountainous terrain, which have increased the death toll exponentially. When examined in this light, the cross of Jesus is not only a comfort to the crucified peoples but a challenge to the structures and systems that continue to regularize and legitimize such crucifixion.

Ellacuría's methodological approach to reality is particularly important when we consider that government officials still fail to take any responsibility for the immigrant deaths at the border—it sees them as “unintended” consequences of a nation's right to control its borders. The Mexican

⁵⁴ Robin Hoover, “The Story of Humane Borders,” in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey* 160–73, at 160.

⁵⁵ Douglas S. Massey, “Backfire at the Border: Why Enforcement without Legislation Cannot Stop Illegal Immigration,” *Trade Policy Analysis* 29 (Washington: Cato Institute, June 13, 2005) 1; <http://www.freetrade.org/node/32> (accessed February 18, 2009). An extended discussion of this research is available in Douglas S. Massey, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

government must also become involved in this process by taking responsibility for its own failures. But the point here is that, regardless of our nationalities, we are called to immerse ourselves in the reality of these immigrants' deaths (*hacerse cargo de la realidad*), to take responsibility for this reality (*cargar con la realidad*), and to actively work to transform this reality by taking people down off the cross (*encargarse de la realidad*) by challenging those people, systems, and forces that contribute to these deaths. At the same time, if we consider migration as a sign of the times, we are left to discover how this sign can offer us new ways of understanding Jesus. Sobrino reminds us that we must allow ourselves to be carried along (*dejarse cargar por la realidad*) into new ways of living by our encounter with the grace and hope that is at work in the lives of crucified peoples and those trying to take them down from the cross.

Jaroslav Pelikan observes that it is the task of every generation to offer its own image of Jesus, much of which is shaped by the hopes and struggles of each historical epoch.⁵⁶ Given that some scholars refer to today as the "age of migration," one wonders if the notion of Jesus as the immigrant God is an appropriate icon for our age.⁵⁷ This image speaks not only to those who are physically on the move, but also all human beings who see life as a pilgrimage and a journey of hope. More palatable presentations of Jesus might emerge from social locations of comfort and affluence, but immigrants bring out one final element of the Jesus story that helps ground our recovery of the historical Jesus on the authentic tradition of *kenosis*. They see in the Jesus story a person who not only was born into marginality and forced into exile, but who also ultimately surrenders everything for the sake of those he loves and appears to lose everything on the cross. The spirituality of Jesus is one of self-sacrifice, self-emptying, and self-offering for the sake of others.

Walking in hope toward an uncertain future, immigrants also relinquish everything they own, knowing that their one companion and lasting security is God and God alone. The immigrant experiences the utter vulnerability of human existence, but at the same time the cross is a sign of the fact that God has entered into the vulnerability of the human condition, even to the point of dying with them. Not limited by the borders created by society, Jesus is not ashamed to walk with those who are crucified today. He offers hope to all, especially those who are dying so that others may live, like so many immigrants today.

⁵⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Ages: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1999) 1–8.

⁵⁷ Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (London: Guilford, 2003).

More theological reflection is needed on the immigrant reality today. Arguably no text in the New Testament better describes the social location and christological importance of that immigrant reality than Matthew 25:31–46. This text offers a particularly important hermeneutical perspective for Christology because of the parallels between those considered “least” (Greek *elachistōn*) in the last judgment account and the social location of undocumented immigrants today.⁵⁸ Many immigrants are people who are hungry in their homelands, thirsty in the deserts, naked after being robbed at gunpoint, sick in hospitals, imprisoned in detention centers, and, if they make it across the border, estranged in the United States.

Seen in this light, immigrants are not simply suffering people who depend on the charity of others, but people who manifest in their flesh the real presence of Christ. The eschatological reversals of the Gospel reveal that immigrants are not just passive recipients of the church’s mission, but, in a mysterious way, active agents in the world’s redemption. The face of Jesus, in whom we shall one day read our judgment, already mysteriously gazes on us, especially through the faces of those we see as the “other.” It remains to be seen whether such a reality can be perceived as graced, but when we contemplate the reality of the undocumented Mexican immigrant who faces death in the desert so that others may live, we catch a glimpse of the crucified peoples whose arduous journey is a place of Christian revelation and human transformation. The eschatological horizon of the immigrant reality also leads us to consider ways in which the crucified peoples of today are integrally related to the salvation of the world and how, as Lydio Tomasi perceptively puts it, “It’s not . . . the Church [that] saves the immigrant, but the immigrant who saves the Church.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Scholars throughout history have debated the meaning of *elachistōn*. For differing accounts of Matthew 25:31–46 and its implications for ethics, see John Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1986) 3–31.

⁵⁹ Lydio F. Tomasi, “The Other Catholics” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1978) 301.