

Communion Without Borders

At Mass we all become immigrants again with Jesus Christ

By DANIEL GROODY, CSC

For the last couple of years I have been teaching a class to college students on U.S. Latino Spirituality. At the beginning of the semester, I ask students to explore more of their family's personal history. In particular, they are to dig more into the story of their ancestors' immigration experience. To the extent possible, they are to interview relatives who know something about the life and times of their ancestors who first came to this country as immigrants. In addition, they are to do background research into the conditions of their ancestors' home country at the time they immigrated. Afterwards, they are asked to reflect on the situation of immigrants coming into this country today. In particular, we look at the situation of Mexican immigrants who break from their homes, cross the border illegally, and risk dehydrating in deserts, drowning in canals, freezing in mountains and suffocating in tractor trailers in order to work in low-paying jobs that no one else wants.

The parallels are striking. Invariably, students come back from this assignment surprised and even shocked to learn about the painful, challenging and difficult stories of immigrants, yesterday and today. Like these students, few of us ever realize the many connections between past and present immigration stories. Even fewer realize the intimate connection between immigration and the Eucharist.

Eucharist and the human journey

The liturgy of the Eucharist, in itself, ritualizes the meaning of the human journey. We gather to remember both the struggles of our past and God's saving presence



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within it. The liturgy not only reminds us that our ancestors were immigrants but also that our very life is migratory by nature: we are a people in movement, on pilgrimage, immigrating from this world to the next, journeying to a final hope in the promised land, longing for the fulfillment of all human desire in the Kingdom of God. We also gather to worship a God who by nature is migratory, who has moved from heaven to earth, from Galilee to Jerusalem and from death to life. In the liturgy, we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, who stands with us on the borders between death and life. His self-giving death ties him to all human suffering and his resurrection enables us to journey with him into a new creation. In the Eucharist, the opening procession ritualizes this movement of a people towards new life in Christ and it is further deepened when we hear the Sacred Scriptures.

The pilgrim People of God

When we listen to the Word of

God, we hear about our ancestors in faith who also were immigrants. Abraham left his home in Ur searching for God's promises (Gn. 11:31 ff). Jacob's sons left looking for food (Gn. 42:1-2). Moses and the Israelites emigrated from Egypt longing for freedom (Ex. 1-18). And Mary and Joseph left Bethlehem fleeing political persecution (Mt. 2:13). For them immigrating meant going through periods of hardship, hunger, disorientation, poverty, need, loneliness, uncertainty and tremendous vulnerability. Most people, in time, would want to forget such painful experiences.

It is striking, however, that after the Israelites settled into the land, God told them not to forget their immigrant experience but to remember it: “Remember the aliens in your midst, for you too were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:19). God called them to remember their hardships and God's care for them in the midst of their difficulties.

This process of remembering is an “Anamnesis,” an ability to recall the extraordinary events of God, especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This memory is ultimately directed towards the transformation — even the transubstantiation — of the people of God through love. Having been loved by God in their need and their helplessness as immigrants, God calls them to love others as He has loved them. The more they remember their own sufferings from the past, the more likely it is that they will offer a compassionate hand to those who suffer today. In particular, by remembering their own immigration experience, they can be sensitive to those who are immigrating today.

Remembering the immigration of our ancestors without openness to those who are immigrating today renders our liturgy empty



Remembering the immigration of our ancestors without openness to those who are immigrants today renders our liturgy empty and meaningless.

and meaningless. The liturgy does not end with our worship service. If our praise of God is not intimately connected to the larger liturgy of life, it has no meaning. Amos warns that worship without justice is idolatry (Amos 5:21-27). If we hunger to receive the bread of life at liturgy but have no hunger to feed those whose life is threatened and who are in need of bread today, we ignore the real presence of Christ in the poor. When Mario left his wife and five children in Mexico and came to the border at Tijuana, he told me all he hoped for in America was for “pan de comer,” literally, “bread to eat,” for his family. Strikingly, only days later and a few miles away, a woman at a luxurious resort in San Diego said she came to the area looking for a “specialty bread” which she could find nowhere else. The contrast was disturbing: here were two people looking for bread in the same place yet living in two totally different worlds, with only a wall between them.

For immigrants, the cost of obtaining their daily bread is often deadly. Immigrants today endure some of the worst conditions of any yet in our history. Willing to work for meager wages at difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs, they are literally “dying to get in.” Stories abound in recent years about the desperate attempts people make to enter this country. In May of this year, authorities discovered the bodies of 18 immigrants who suffocated in a truck near Victoria, Texas. This was by no means an isolated incident. For the last decade, an immigrant a day had died trying to enter the United States. These deaths too are intimately connected to the Eucharist.

The Eucharist, ultimately, not only structures our religious obligations but shapes the way we see reality and the way we see others like immigrants who die unjustly. One of compelling dimensions of early Christianity, especially in a class conscious Roman society, was that it gathered people together who came to celebrate their

equality before God. As Paul notes, in Christ there is no gentile or Jew, no slave or free, no woman or man (Gal. 3:28). Echoed throughout the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian community was a place where all shared things in common, where their common life echoed that of the Trinity, where there were no walls but only the mutually penetrating force of a love that binds, unites and integrates (Acts 1-4). Paul speaks about how Christ’s death has broken down the wall of enmity and division, enabling us all to see ourselves connected to a larger human family (Ephes. 2:14). If there is one place where these two worlds are reconciled, where the divisions between rich and poor, immigrant and “native,” breakdown, it is the Eucharist. The Eucharist remembers a God who has broken down walls of every sort, bringing a diverse community into one body. As a consequence, the closing rite sends us forth to the ends of the earth to proclaim the good news and, in following Christ, to “migrate” with him from sin to grace, from slavery to freedom, and from injustice to justice. Though fears since September 11th have led many (even Christians) to want to build even bigger walls and greater barriers, the Eucharist reminds us that the Christian community is called ultimately to transcend national boundaries, even while

its worship is rooted in particular expressions of cultures.

We are all immigrants

As many parishes face the increasingly complex challenges of multi-cultural ministry, one of the most pressing needs will be outreach to immigrants, particularly Hispanic immigrants. While often perceived as a threat, they bring much that can enrich the church. Memory about our immigration histories is not just exercise of nostalgia but recognition that we are all immigrants in this life of faith, even if we are not physically displaced. The suffering of immigrants today is also a challenge to conform our lives to the mind and heart of God. To remember the immigrant and welcome the poor is to live a godly life, a life of holiness. Matthew 25 goes even further in saying that to welcome to the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked and imprisoned is to welcome Christ. Hungry in their native countries, dying of thirst in the desert, estranged in a new land, naked in their vulnerability and imprisoned in detention facilities, immigrants bear a unique cross, and, in a mysterious way, reveal a unique manifestation of Christ in our midst. The liturgy of the Eucharist is a place where we seek to develop a community that transcends all borders, that sees in the eyes of the immigrant stranger a brother, a sister and a presence of Christ.

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