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The Immigrant in Our Midst

By Theron N. Ford and Jen Merritt

As the world experiences global human migration on an unprecedented scale, rich nations struggle to curtail the incoming flood of immigrants, while poor nations suffer population loss. Migration and immigration are not new concepts, what is new are the conditions under which much of this movement occurs and how the world responds.

The Society of Jesus' response has been to name migration as one of its five top international priorities. In June of 2005 three faculty members from John Carroll met with representatives from over twenty national and international Jesuit Universities and social service organizations on the campus of Fairfield University to ask how Jesuit institutions might address this emerging crisis. The program, Migration Studies and Jesuit Identity: Forging a Path Forward, developed by Fairfield faculty and jointly sponsored by The Association of American Jesuit Colleges and Universities, the Social and International Ministries Office of the United States Jesuit Conference, and Jesuit Refugee Services had the following goals:

To establish collaborative relationships in migration studies, research, and advocacy.

To consider academic research, traditional interdisciplinary course instruction, and experiential educational approaches such as service learning.

To consider an advocacy role in helping to alleviate current injustices experienced by migrants.

"We are united by a mission with an outward thrust," said James Storms, S.J., then secretary for social and international ministries, Jesuit Conference, USA. "This program is interdisciplinary, international, inter-ministerial..., and concerned about vulnerable people on the move."

New Complexities

The U.S. and other developed nations are increasingly the final destination for varied immigrant groups. Historically, this is not a new phenomenon. During the 19th century different ethnic groups faced obstacles both similar to and different from those facing immigrants today. For the vast majority of 19th century newcomers, their re-location to the U.S. was permanent; this is in contrast to the intent of many groups that enter the U.S. currently. There is clearly a large would-be immigrant population waiting to enter this nation legally, yet, the nation also copes with a massive illegal migration population.

Today's migrants, for various reasons, cannot or do not seek to become permanent citizens. Rather, migrants often enter illegally, with the intent of earning enough money

to support family members left behind in their homelands.

For the U.S. the primary sources of this migrant population are Mexico and Central America. The problem is nevertheless a global one. Driven by poverty, thousands of African migrants rushed the razor wire fences in Morocco, in an attempt to gain entry to Spanish territory. Many of these men, once captured and returned to the desert, died of thirst. Others sustained serious wounds from their encounter with the razor wire. Yet, these life or death hardships are rarely a deterrent.

For all newcomers to any nation — whether legal immigrant or illegal — learning a new language, understanding new customs and appreciating different religious practices present significant obstacles to social and economic success. Increasing racial and ethnic tensions in the U.S. and abroad make acceptance a major challenge. Again, this is not without precedent; during the last major wave of European immigration to the U.S., Eastern and Southern Europe sent peoples who were not Protestant or even Christian, and who were quite different in physical appearance from immigrant populations during the 1700s and early 1800s. Eventually, they too gained acceptance as full

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citizens, due primarily to their shared European ancestry and their status as members of the white race. However, recent migrant populations, many of whom are not white, find racial harmony remains an elusive goal in American culture.

Migrants from Mexico and Central America are often publicly perceived as “white-Hispanic” or as “black Hispanic” or as Native American. Likewise, newcomers from Caribbean islands may face the same obstacles as American blacks.

Cultural and Language Issues

Unlike previous newcomers who sought to master English as quickly as possible and even Anglicized their ethnic sounding names, large numbers of Hispanic newcomers to the U.S. join well-established Spanish speaking communities scattered across the nation. These newcomers provide an on-going source of exclusively Spanish speakers; and, while the desire to learn English may be present, many remain reluctant to abandon Spanish—prompting some Anglo-Americans and politicians to advocate English-only policies in schools and public places.

The traditional term for working new populations into American society is *assimilation*. This paradigm assumes that newcomers will adopt the normative cultural values, customs, language, and social behaviors common to those of the dominant culture. This paradigm however has been and continues to be problematic. Each successive immigration wave has resulted in Europeans voluntarily becoming ethnic minorities only temporarily. At the same time, Native Americans

had their languages, religions, and customs nearly destroyed in an attempt to Americanize them. They, like African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans, are the nation’s traditional involuntary minorities.



Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans found themselves part of the U.S. as a result of the Spanish American War, while African Americans are descendant from slaves hauled to the U.S. in chains. The earlier two groups had little choice but to lose their languages and customs. Both endured forced assimilation in varying degrees. Spanish-speaking minorities increasingly and unwillingly face a backlash against their language and their traditional cultures. Most importantly, for all groups, the ultimate payoff for assimilation, full admittance into the white power structure, has seldom been achieved because each of these groups is predominately non-white.

Another challenge to the assimilation paradigm is the behavior common to many new migrants. As temporary workers, they are engaged in multiple border crossings, the practice of entering and re-entering the U.S. numerous times, and each time they go home they have the opportunity to reconnect and strengthen their linguistic and cultural associations. This replenishing of linguistic and cultural ties

coupled with the explosion in the Hispanic population, virtually assures that the U.S. may well become a *de facto*, English-Spanish, bilingual nation in the future, despite attempts to the contrary.

Public Policy, Public Education, and Migrants

Faced with the perceived potential destruction of English language primacy and a move toward pluralism, politicians, including President Bush, support federal policies that are punitive for persons with limited English proficiency generally and speakers of Spanish in particular. Specifically, federal education legislation *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) includes an English acquisition provision. This provision effectively dismantles attempts to provide bi-lingual education for both Spanish and English speakers. Moreover, transitional language programs, which support Spanish speakers as they strive to gain proficiency in English, are under fire as well. America’s public schools have a mandate to undercut efforts that would preserve the students’ primary language as they gain English proficiency. The opposition to bi-lingual education is even more puzzling when one considers that many upscale private and public schools, recognizing the advantages gained from being bi-lingual, have Spanish immersion programs. Often beginning in kindergarten, children attending these schools receive instruction in both Spanish and English in all subjects.

More disturbing, the NCLB act mandates using English-only tests

to determine student academic achievement levels. This policy contributes to the increasingly high dropout rate among Hispanic students, estimated at 60 percent in some districts. In the public education arena, the long-held tenet of assimilation as the route to becoming an American strengthens as politicians and the public react with fear and prejudice toward what has been labeled the "second conquest of America."

The Mandate to Witness

The physical, economic, and social discrimination, threats, and prejudice migrants and would-be immigrants routinely encounter, here and globally are real. In his address entitled "Cutting Edge Issues in Forced and Voluntary Migration," Luca Dall'Oglio, permanent observer to the UN from the International Organization for Migration, noted: Discussion of migration today is all too often fed by misperceptions, ignorance, and fear. We all need to work hard to ensure that the discourse is better informed, more rational, less prone to superficial analysis and rid it of some of its enduring but unsubstantiated stereotypes. Many people, in the academia, in the private sector and in civil society as a whole, are showing the leadership that is needed to combat xenophobia and stigma. Migrants must not become the scapegoats of global social change in the 21st century. (Dall'Oglio, 2005)

Membership in Jesuit institutions challenges us to bear witness to and advocate for the just and humane treatment of all people. Nor should we consent to the economic exploitation of the nation's newest arrivals by our corporate and financial institutions, as evidenced in abusive labor policies and practices. In the face of



Loyola Marymount University.

these abuses, we tend to focus on macro-level solutions that hold the promise of sweeping change; as a result we might be accidentally almost assuring the perpetuation of a sense of the impossible and inaction. Yet, each individual, department, and school within the global network of "the academy" has the capability to critically reflect on public policy and advocate on behalf of migrants.

Current Efforts

Jesuit colleges and universities across the globe have begun efforts to "walk in solidarity" with migrants as part of the Society of Jesus' mission for social justice. Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., formed the Institute for the Study of International Migration [ISIM], in 1998, as part of a joint venture between the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and the Law Center. Through teaching, research, and social outreach, they state, "ISIM focuses on all aspects of

international migration, including the causes of and potential responses to population movements, immigration and refugee law and policy, comparative migration studies, the integration of immigrants into their host societies, and the effects of international migration on social, economic, demographic, foreign policy and national security concerns. ISIM also studies internal displacement, with particular attention to the forced movements of people for reasons that would make them refugees if they crossed an international border."

Boston College launched its interdisciplinary *Center for Human Rights and International Justice* in November of 2005, with a public forum on the issue of worldwide refugees.

Other Jesuit institutions have developed academic mechanisms for outreach and service targeting specific migrant populations. One example is the Center for Latino Studies in the Americas at The University of San Francisco.

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Going Beyond: A Call to Action

Comprehensive programs such as these set a formidable precedent for action. However, individual faculty members, staff members, and administrators within any academic discipline or administrative department potentially are situated perfectly to support efforts on behalf of immigrants and migrants through the development of creative curriculum, outreach programming, research, or policy.

Faculty and students in business and economics could investigate the scramble of banking institutions and Western Union to dominate the remittances trade, a practice whereby large

monetary charges finance the movement of currency to family members left behind in Mexico, Central American, and parts of Africa. These remittances, in many cases are the sole income for those families. Perhaps, feasible alternatives to this exploitative practice can be generated.

Students majoring in languages might well fulfill a field experience serving as translators for persons with limited English proficiency in the hospital setting, worship services, at social service agencies, or acting as tutors for non-English speakers in schools.

Education students and faculty could investigate the plight of students in the nation's schools who have limited English proficiency, then pose solutions that could assure such stu-

dents increased academic achievement and enhanced social support.

Future psychologists must understand the unique psychological affects resulting from the intersection of racism, marginalization, exploitation, and fear that many immigrants and migrants experience.

Above all, everyone can advocate — write letters to government leaders demanding an end to policies biased against the newest immigrants and migrants. The Fairfield conference called upon all “to become aware of the migrant in our midst and make a committed effort to walk in solidarity with him or her in order to fulfill, not only the social mission of scholasticism but the ethical tenets of our liberal democracy.” ■