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Immigration Dialogue: Commentary

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COMMENTARY: “An Excruciatingly Complex Topic...”

By Richard Ryscavage, S.J.

From the early days of the Republic, immigration to America has been both celebrated and denigrated. Along side the rich tradition of welcoming great numbers of immigrants from around the world runs another vibrant tradition of opposing continual immigration. Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to his daughter, complained about letting the uneducated and non-English speaking Germans settle in Philadelphia. The Irish and Italian immigrants faced violent anti-Catholic discrimination. So when Ford and Merritt write of the challenges that current immigrants face

in the United States, I suspect that those challenges today are probably *less* challenging than what previous waves of immigrants faced.

It has always been necessary to balance the benefits of immigration with the social disruption and cultural changes brought on by large-scale immigration. In general it is fair to say the United States has han-

dled immigration far better than countries in Europe. No country in the world can draw upon such a rich experience of what worked and what did not work in our immigration history. We are today going through a new period of enormous immigration – comparable to what the nation experienced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So it

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should not surprise anyone that many American citizens are raising concerns that the country has lost control of its borders, its language, its Protestant cultural core. These concerns are not, I believe, primarily racist and they should not be trivialized or dismissed by immigration advocates. To see one's cultural home "invaded" by uninvited strangers taps into a rich and honest historical vein in American life.

Migration does not lend itself to easy categories of "left" and "right". We have a President who is unusually sensitive to the value of immigration. He may be able to act as a bridge between the political forces that encourage and those that oppose further large scale immigration trends. In my years of heading the US Catholic Bishops Office of migration and refugees I found that immigration not only united the conservative and liberal wings of the Church in the United States, but that often the Republican business community were the most enthusiastic proponents of liberal migration policies.

I would be particularly wary of any approach that stands in the way of children learning English. At a time when English is becoming the "world language" to penalize children by letting them stay in a Spanish or Chinese "language ghetto" would be unfortunate. Our experience of bilingual education in this country has been marked by many failures.

It is true that the current wave of immigration is different from those of old. It takes place in an increasingly globalized world. Globalization and its supporting technology have changed the nature of migration. Sovereign states because of globalization have a decreasing ability to control migration. Migrants, in turn, have to deal with a global economy that swiftly changes the structure of their labor. America can no longer legislate a domestic

immigration law and expect it to work without taking in to consideration the global economic engine that often drives migration. Too much of a domestic focus on immigration can lead to impossible solutions.

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he Jesuit Migration Academic Network focuses mainly on research and teaching at the university level. Advocacy is sometimes a natural off-shoot of that

collaborative research and teaching but we should not give the impression that American Jesuit institutions will assume migration advocacy roles in the public square. Advocacy should flow from particular research and teaching nodes within the university and not the university itself.

These cautionary remarks are not meant to undermine the important and valid thrust of the article by Theron Ford and Jen Merritt. I simply want to remind readers that migration is an excruciatingly complex topic. There does not exist a general theory of migration that might explain why people immigrate. There is much we do not know. So our advocacy – which in the Jesuit tradition should always be rooted in solid scholarship – must sometimes be modulated with a dose of modest uncertainty and a respect for opposing viewpoints. ■

Immigration Documentary by a Fairfield Jesuit

For a dramatic aspect of the immigration issue, consider *Posada*, a new documentary film available on DVD, written, produced, and directed by Mark McGregor, S.J., of Fairfield University. The term *Posada* comes from the Mexican traditional retelling of the Holy Family's search for shelter. The film focuses on three Mexican boys detained by immigration officers in their attempts to cross the border, but who have remained here.

Fr. Richard Ryscavage, S.J., the author of the above article, is interviewed in the film. *Posada* is available through Loyola Productions.
Email: info@loyolaproductions.com

