

ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO



Office for Human Dignity & Solidarity—Immigration Ministry

SESSION TWO

The Reality of Immigration

Signs of the Times ■ Grace and Blessing



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PART ONE

Introduction

Introduction and Greetings

Initial Prayer

Lord, in your plan for us there could be changes and journeys. No one wants to leave their homeland and you, once a migrant, know it well. But you always bring life out of death and hope out of obstacles. We know that our journey, even if fraught with difficulty, has seeds of life for us and for others. Give us clarity to see those beginnings of hope and those seeds that contain your promise. May joy rise in our hearts as we follow and walk with you. May we have generosity to share those beginnings of hope with others. Amen.

A Reading from the Word of God

The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you. Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother's son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, by the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said: To your descendants I will give this land. So Abram built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.—**GENESIS 12:1-7**

Commentary

In Abraham's story we see that, even if he did not understand, God's plans are always a blessing. Migration can be a source of life for many. We will later return to this same reading to hear, in prayer, what God tells us for our own life.

PART TWO

Listening

From Everyday Life: Things That Happen

"I never would have dreamed that I would have to leave my land, Cuba, and everything I loved. But there came a day when staying in Cuba was impossible because of the oppressive government. While not wealthy, we lived comfortably. When we left we were required to leave everything we owned behind. My six-year old brother even had to turn over his shirts. The first years here I did all kinds of things to help my family to survive. I started by looking for empty bottles and cans to resell them. Years later, I discovered my vocation as a servant of other exiles and immigrants. In the pain of my own uprootedness, I found the strength to seek the grace of God present among us. I created a missionary group, *Amor en Acción*, to help the poorest communities of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Now I teach theology at Barry University in Miami and my specialization is deepening the spirituality of exiles and immigrants. I know God led me here to create life with Him in the midst of situations of apparent death."
—Alicia

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

Alicia was able to find a seed of hope and life in the midst of pain. How is my story similar to or different from hers? Do I sometimes ask myself, "Who am I? Why I am here?" Do I think sometimes that perhaps God lead me here for a purpose, even if I did not understand it at the moment? Could there be some plan of grace hidden in the fact of my immigration? Please share: This is how I got here...and I came because...(comment on causes and personal reasons or external forces.) What did you think when you had to leave your homeland? Was it a joyful option, or something unavoidable? How do you feel now? Have you been able to discover the grace and the blessing of your situation?

From Everyday Life: Things That Happen

We are not the first to emigrate nor will we be the last. From the beginning humanity, the lands of this planet have seen a constant mobility of the people that walked upon them. Humans have never been static beings. Throughout the centuries, people have

migrated from one place to another for various reasons. Some out of curiosity to see distant places, and others to seek refuge from tribal conflicts and war. Many wanted to find a place where they could live happily with their loved ones without undergoing hunger, poverty, or persecution.

In analyzing current trends of world migration, we have to acknowledge that the search to find a well-paying job and the hope of progress are main reasons for migration today. These reasons have pulled millions of people from Latin America and the Caribbean to migrate to more developed countries with the hope of a better life.



Since the “discovery” of the American continent, this part of the world has been a place of immigration that attracted people from other lands. We know that after the arrival of the European colonizers, this continent also experienced the forced migration of African slaves. The 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th were marked by the immigration of millions of Europeans and Asians searching for opportunities of a better life. The last 50 years, however, was a time of mass migrations of people from Latin America and the Caribbean within the continent and to developed countries.

What has caused these migrations? If we analyze the economic situation of the Latin American countries in the sixties and seventies, we will note that economic progress was not the same for the whole region. Some countries experienced a rapid industrial growth while others continued to increase their external debt. Growth in the informal sector and trade deals between Latin American nations that did not benefit all levels of society was also observed. By 1990, as a result, 2.5% of the Latin American population had emigrated. Latino emigrants constitute 9.2% of all immigrants in the world.

Before 1960, however, the Latin American migration had been limited to the movement between neighboring countries. In the sixties and seventies, people started to move overseas. Much of this movement was also due to political reasons. Violence and political instability forced many people to migrate. Another cause was the worsening of the economic situation in these countries. As a result of this “lost decade” of development, thousands of people started to immigrate to the United States. The growth of the Latin American population in this country was very notable in the following 30 years: from one million in 1960 to almost 8.5 million in 1990. According to the latest census estimates from 2014, the Hispanic population is at 55 million or 17% of the total population. That does not include the millions who evaded the census for fear that their status as undocumented would be discovered.

A Brief History about Migrations to the United States

A large part of the history of immigration to the United States has traditionally been focused on the arrival of immigrants to Ellis Island in New York or Angel Island in San Francisco. For immigrants, leaving the homeland is a traumatic moment. But in fact, leaving home was only the first in a series of conflicts and changes of life, with uncertain outcomes.

The history, although much older, starts being documented in the 19th century, with mass migrations from Europe and Asia. During the 19th and 20th centuries there have been a succession of waves of European migrations, particularly from Germany, Ireland, Italy and Greece, and from other European countries in lesser proportions. Asian immigration has also been very significant. If we study history carefully, we can see that there have always been attempts to legislate the migratory flux, and generally this has been an intensely painful and difficult process for immigrants. History is also full of cases of prejudice and persecution. But it is also full of cases of personal and communitarian successes in changing feelings, prejudices and laws.

During the last few years, the United States has seen an upsurge of anti-immigration sentiment, particularly with the passing of law HB 1070 in Arizona. Various states attempted to pass similar laws; but many other states saw the negative consequences of such a law and voted against it. And yet, the struggle continues.

If HB 1070 had any positive effect, it was to rouse and mobilize many ministers and activists in the struggle against something they felt was unjust and apply political pressure to make things change.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

Why do people leave their homes? Do you know people who migrated for economic or political reasons? What caused them to leave? In which ways do immigration laws have a moral and ethical impact? In what way does a law, or actions that could have negative results, have the power to push people to action and to a ministry of grace and blessing? Do we know the laws of our state well? Does your state enforce the “Secured Communities Act”? Did your state approve its version of the DREAM Act?

PART THREE Learning

Now let us see what Scripture, the Church and theological reflection say about these situations and how they offer insight into our own life and attitudes.

Enlightened by the Word

Let us read the passage from Genesis 12:1-7 again.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

What words or expressions stand out to you? What does this passage say to our own life? How does this passage shed light on the reality of immigration today? What elements arise as words of comfort or of challenge for us today?

Understanding the Passage

GENESIS 12:1–7 Abraham was the son of Teraj and the first migrant to leave Ur on the way to the Promised land. Once his father died in Haran, Abram is called to leave his homeland and to emigrate to an unknown land that God is to show him. There are several interesting elements in this event: a) the nomadic nature of Semite peoples; “It was not uncommon for the ancestors to leave their lands. This was something common; b) the idea that the land is a gift from God and not a right; c) the personality of a foreign person who migrates guided by God is a good way to raise the awareness of the audience.

The narration also has some interesting points: migration is carried out by the command of God; there is an act of obedience on Abram’s part; and the movement is not temporary, but final and founded on the promise of God.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

How is the call of Abraham to leave his land similar or different from my own? What was my intention when I left? What are the intentions of many of the immigrants I know? How can a this experience be changed into grace and blessing? What blessings are promised to us? What type of abundant life can we give light to?

Enlightened by the Doctrine of the Church

On many occasions the Church has looked at immigration with concern, but also with hope. The important document of the American Synod of Bishops, *Ecclesia in America*, enlightened and encouraged the reality of immigration and the possibilities of grace despite the pain of this reality. The document says:

The Church is well aware of the problems created by this situation and is committed to spare no effort in developing her own pastoral strategy among these immigrant people, in order to help them settle in their new land and to foster a welcoming attitude among the local population, in the belief that a mutual openness will bring enrichment to all.

Church communities will not fail to see in this phenomenon a specific call to live an evangelical fraternity and at the same time a summons to strengthen their own religious spirit with a view to a more penetrating evangelization. With this in mind, the Synod Fathers recalled that “the Church in America must be a vigilant advocate, defending against any unjust restriction the natural right of individual persons to move freely within their own nation and from one nation to another. Attention must be called to the rights of migrants and their families and to respect for their human dignity, even in cases of non-legal immigration”. (236)

Migrants should be met with a hospitable and welcoming attitude which can encourage them to become part of the Church's life, always with due regard for their freedom and their specific cultural identity. Cooperation between the dioceses from which they come and those in which they settle, also through specific pastoral structures provided for in the legislation and praxis of the Church, (237) has proved extremely beneficial to this end. In this way the most adequate and complete pastoral care possible can be ensured” (*Ecclesia in America*, 1999, n. 65).

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

What strikes you most about this reading? Why is it important to read the signs of the times?

The bishops of the United States have also spoken often about the topic of immigration. Archbishop Edwin Frederick O'Brien of Baltimore, Maryland, says, “We acknowledge that our nation must protect and keep its borders. But we also suggest a more fundamental principle that when the basic needs of a person do not find an answer in their own country, these persons have the right to seek a solution outside, in order to support themselves and their families. We are not advocating for illegal immigration, but we simply cannot turn our back when the basic needs of those who have come to our country, like all the previous generations, looking for a better life are at stake.

Many argue that in past generations (which for many include our grandparents and parents) came to this country by legal means. But today's immigration system is very different. It is fraught with problems and backlogs, and it is almost impossible for people to adequately navigate the system. Others also say that immigrants are an economic drain for our communities, without recognizing how much immigrants contribute. According to the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), national statistics indicate that immigrants generally pay taxes; that they pay much more than they receive in public benefits; that the government benefits from their presence.”

Seeds of Hope

On his trip to the United States, Benedict XVI addressed the American community recognizing the reality of immigration and calling Catholics to an attitude of commitment and solidarity.

“Americans have always been a people of hope; your ancestors came here with the hope to find new freedom and opportunities, while the vast unexplored lands gave them hope to start anew: building a new nation on new foundation...do not allow yourselves to be overcome by pessimism, inertia or the problems of life. Rather, faithful to the commitments you acquired at Baptism, deepen each day in the knowledge of Christ and allow your heart to be conquered by his love and forgiveness. The Church in the United States, welcoming so many immigrant sons and daughters, has gradually grown thanks to the vitality of the witness of faith of the faithful of Spanish language. That is why the Lord calls you to continue to contribute to the future of the Church in this country and to spreading the Gospel.”

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

How do you see your presence in this country and the presence of immigrants?
What benefits can immigrants bring to the society and to the Church?

PART FOUR

Proclaiming

- How can I place the grace and blessing God has given me as an immigrant at the service of others?
- What type of leader am I? How can I make the pain of my own migration turn into grace and blessing?
- First, let us think of which are our blessings and talents
 - What characteristics of our culture make us proud?
 - How do we adapt to the dominant culture?
 - What are some of the characteristics and values of our culture that we might be losing and should recuperate?
- Let us list the challenges that the reality of immigration and the need of the acculturation of our people in this country presents to our leadership.
 - What implications does all this have for leadership within the Church? How can we, as leaders, help immigrants to discover their own potential and the blessing that their own immigration might mean for others?
- Perhaps we have to make some changes. Types of conversion required in a leader:
 - Intellectual conversion is the recognition that the structure of our own knowledge and options consist of a series of operations: to experience,

to understand, to judge and to decide. It is called a conversion because it stays away from the notion that knowing is simply looking. In philosophy this idea is called empiricism and it is the theory that things only exist if they can be seen and measured. Therefore, trust and love would not exist because they cannot be measured.

- Moral conversion happens when we realize that the tendency to transcendence, to going beyond our own interests and needs in order to care for the needs and interests of others, is to strive for the common good. This conversion is effective at its own core, our feelings, joys, pains, fears and desires give our consciousness strength. Therefore we must constantly discern our feelings and values. Sometimes we will have to overcome difficult feelings in order to do good.
- Religious conversion happens when we come to understand through our own experience and the testimony of Scripture how God loves: unconditionally. Unconditionality does not mean indifference, but rather that God pours out his love on us, whether we respond or not, or whether we choose to love God or not. Jesus speaks of how God makes rain fall on the just and the sinner, on the faithful and the unfaithful. Religious conversion happens when we decide that our own efforts also be unconditional. The test that Jesus places before us is the will to forgive. Religious conversion is a radical conversion implying intelligence, judgment and free will.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

In which ways do I feel called to conversion? What internal border do I need to cross?

What inner land does God call me to leave? What do I hope to reach? As leaders, in which ways can we participate in the Catholic Campaign for a Just Immigration Reform?

PART FIVE

Final Prayer

Lord, at some moment you called us or allowed us to leave our land, sometimes with much pain. Now you call us to leave our inner lands, to break out of our own comfort or security zones in order to serve your people. In patient and unselfish support, we are called to help our brothers and sisters to discover the seeds of life and promise present in the pain of their immigration or exile. Allow us to turn the pain in life into a new Resurrection. With the Passion of Christ, we can walk through the deserts and death of our situation to reach the abundant life of your life in us. We can convert bad to good, pain to joy for many, the “bad luck” we thought we had into grace and strength for your Church and your people. Amen.

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