



Embrace the Spirit

The Caribbean Initiative

I was a Stranger...and You Welcomed Me

By: Agustina Luvis-Nuñez

Group Prayer

... When we call the stranger “brother,”

God himself walks with us ...

“The Poor” by José Antonio Olivares

Introduction

The first time that I heard someone speak on the subject of the Church’s responsibility towards immigrants was in the year 2000. I was a student at the Hispanic Summer Program at Princeton Theological Seminary. Until that week, the parable of the Good Samaritan was a pretty story about love of neighbor. I had never asked myself the question “Who is my neighbor?”



The topic of migration is not one that is often treated in our churches; it is neither preached, nor is it the subject of Bible studies or Sunday Schools. It is not even discussed in Bible institutes or seminaries. However, beginning in the 1970’s, people from the Dominican Republic began to arrive in my neighborhood, “La Central,” and the church I have always belonged to, Defensores de la Fe (Defenders of the Faith), immediately mobilized to share what little we had with the “Dominican brothers and sisters who had arrived with nothing,” as my pastor would say. My Pentecostal church never reflected theologically on the meaning of this work, but we never quit seeking to help those who had recently arrived.

When I returned from Princeton, the first person I called was Bienvenida (her name means “welcome” in Spanish), my friend and Dominican sister who I had come to know at the church and who helps me occasionally with some of my household chores. I felt the need to hear her talk about something that I had never asked about before – how she had come to Puerto Rico. Both of us let go of our brooms and detergents

and sat to talk for several hours – to laugh and to cry together. Bienvenida made the decision to leave her country in search of a better future. With an admirable determination, she bought her “visa to a dream.” She decided to travel to Puerto Rico as an undocumented person, a decision that drove her to cross the 80 mile Mona Passage between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Experts estimate that waves in the channel average 12 feet in height and it is known that the waters are shark-infested. Of course, Bienvenida didn’t use the official ferry; her Noah’s Ark was a *yola* (a rowboat with a mast for a sail).

She paid many US dollars, money that she had saved by working hard for many years and had received from friends already in Puerto Rico. This money gave her the chance to see death face to face. For three days and nights she was in the boat, and then she had to swim the last stretch of the crossing. No one was going to run the risk of having their boat impounded onshore. Tossed into the sea off the west coast of Puerto Rico, she arrived soul-soaked, with hands bleeding from hanging on for dear life, spending the rest of that first night in a ditch, not knowing where to go.

To emigrate is never an easy decision. It implies giving up family and friends, to head without a clear sense of direction to lands that are strange and hostile. A person who has to migrate suffers for what has been left behind and for what has not been found upon arrival. One is forever bumping into racism, xenophobia, and class prejudice. There are varied reasons for migration. The most common ones are political and economic reasons.

Our reality

Our Puerto Rican soil is not an exception. Our island receives migrants from all over the world, the largest number from the Dominican Republic. The Dominicans have become the ones who have the hardest time finding protection and are the most vulnerable. Since documents are usually demanded as a prerequisite for any kind of rights, this is a population who easily falls prey to human rights abuses on a range that covers ridicule, rejection, abuse, and even death.¹

Those who study the topic of migration in Puerto Rico point out that immigration began to grow after the middle part of the 20th century, though there had been some limited immigration since the end of the 19th century. After the 1960s, Puerto Rico began to experience a considerable number of immigrants, especially Cuban exiles. Dominicans arrived only in small numbers. The motivation behind immigration from these two neighboring countries contrasts considerably. The Cubans left their country mostly due to political circumstances, while the Dominican immigration was due mostly to the search for better work opportunities in light of unemployment and economic problems at home. During the 1980s, the Dominican community in Puerto Rico outgrew the Cuban community and the Dominicans became the most significant immigrant population in Puerto Rico.

Biblical Reflection

Migration is a constant and common theme in what we call Salvation History in the Bible. Both the people of Israel and the Church that arises from the first community of Christians are considered pilgrims on this earth.

¹ Osvaldo Burgos, *Discrimen contra la comunidad dominicana*, Colegio de Abogados de PR, (www.capr.zaspy.com) Viewed January 21, 2014.

The Hebrews lived in exile their whole lives. Abraham and his descendants left their land and their kindred to travel to strange countries, from Haran to Canaan. They were foreigners enslaved by the Egyptian empire.²

Biblical history is explicit when it describes the circumstances that migrants endured. These people were forced into exile by several empires: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally Romans. The experience of exile, of forced relocation, is a humiliating one.³

As a constant reminder, the exhortation of the people is repeated time and again: Do not harm the stranger in your midst, for you too were a stranger in Egypt (Exodus 22:20).

In Deuteronomy 26:5, there is a confession of faith that every Hebrew person was expected to know: “You will speak these words before Yahweh, your God: My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt and resided there as an immigrant, few in number, and became a great nation, strong and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated them . . .”

God’s position in the Old Testament is constantly on the side of the stranger. He demanded of the people and of the leaders that they not exploit the foreigners, nor should they be unjust to them, nor should they abuse them, nor should they subject them to forced labor (Exodus 23:12).

Once we move to the New Testament we find Jesus the Son of God, who very early in life experienced forced migration (Matthew 2:13-23). He experienced prejudice because of where he was from (John 1:46). His life and praxis reflect an egalitarian treatment of all persons without exception, and a special solidarity with marginalized persons and people who were oppressed in Jewish society. Merely a rereading of the passages dealing with the Samaritan woman (John 4), the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and the parable of the stranger who arrives at night in search of help (Luke 10:30-36) is enough to offer the Christian message regarding the matter of immigration. All of these texts place the immigrant, not as an enemy, but as someone worthy of receiving compassion.

In the most ancient of baptismal formula found in Galatians 3:28, the apostle Paul reaffirms to the Galatian believers that, in Christ, national, gender, racial, geographical, cultural, and religious differences disappear. Christ places all human beings in a condition of equality before God. The first epistle of Peter gives pride of place to the foreigners of the diaspora: from Puntus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythina. These are immigrants, poor and discriminated against, and by means of this letter their faith and hope are strengthened. They are invited to be living stones and builders. The epistle of James, also sent to the tribes of the diaspora, likewise favors them. This diaspora was key to the extension of the gospel.⁴

Recent historical developments and social conditions have created urgency for the church to examine and respond to the dynamic reality of immigration. We know that more than 11 million undocumented people live in the United States.

I would like to make a brief departure here to speak about the use of immigration terminology. Every day we hear people in the media refer to undocumented people as illegal immigrants. The term itself is contradictory

² Genesis 11:31, 12:1, 12:9, 12:10, 13:12, 13:17, 20:1, 21:34, 31:1

³ Elsa Tamez, *Migración y desarraigo en la Biblia*, (www.justiciaypaz.dominicos.org) Viewed January 21, 2014

⁴ Ibid.

because the Law of Immigration and Naturalization of the United States defines an immigrant as a person who has legally been given permanent residence.

This goes beyond semantics, however. Language is never neutral. Our language can give life and can cause death. To use the term “illegals” to refer to undocumented people is a tactic that influences the debate on immigration and feeds hatred and violence. There are no illegal human beings. All human beings have legal status; the law validates their capacity to exercise rights, to acquire property, and to enter into contracts. Actions and behaviors can be illegal, but people cannot.

Christian hospitality toward undocumented people begins with the correct use of language to refer to their immigration status. As a Christian church, our mission is to offer assistance to immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. On the other hand, we also have the responsibility to advocate for an immigration policy that will be fair and generous.

A theological reflection on this topic should begin from the fact that we as human beings have been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27).

To speak of this image of God is a way to touch the profundity of human nature. This definition also reminds us that human life cannot be understood apart from the mystery of God.

To conceive of an immigrant in theological terms is to conceive of an immigrant in moral terms as well. Every factor that destroys or hinders the inherent dignity of human nature is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore must be the object of the church’s prophetic denunciation. To honor that image of God in human beings implies the offering of relationship opportunities with other human beings in love and liberty, as well as offering the means to sustain the lives of individuals and families and the protection of their health and security.

Imago Dei in the Old Testament is completed in the New Testament through the image of Christ or *imago Christi*. Christ incarnated this image of God and he is the means provided by God for the human being to migrate towards God again, restoring what had been lost to sin. Through Jesus, God enters the broken and sinful territory of the human condition and helps humanity to return to God. God does this by identifying with the other, becoming human with all that humanity entails. The wearing of another’s shoes is the most difficult migratory journey that a human can carry out. In Jesus, God crosses all the borders, all the limits, and jumps all the walls, doing so as an act of mere grace. His cross is solidarity with those who suffer.⁵

The mission of the church is to restore the image of God in each person through the redemptive work of Christ. The church has the great commission, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to emigrate to all nations, proclaiming the good news of salvation and working against the forces that disfigure that image of God.

The mission of the church challenges the human tendency to make an idol of the State, or of religion, or of a particular ideology. Jesus’ openness to Gentiles – his encounters with the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30), with the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10), and many others – illustrates that Jesus also goes beyond borders and narrow interpretations of the law, in obedience to a greater law that is the law of love (Mark 12:28-34).

⁵ Daniel G Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration”, *Theological Studies* 70 (2009), p. 1-15

A central dimension of the mission of the church is Jesus's ministry of reconciliation. He works in order to overcome the human constructs that divide citizens from foreigners, categories that are created precisely by the laws that are immoral.

One of the most divisive areas in the debate over immigration is the matter of immigration law and public policy. People commonly affirm that they have no problem with the presence of immigrants but that they have a problem with people who break the law. What is objectionable in that perspective is that it makes no distinction between different types of law and assumes that all law is just. Thomas Aquinas used to say that there is divine law, eternal law, natural law, and civil law. Divine law corresponds to the law in the Old and New Testaments. The eternal law governs the universe. Natural law deals with ethical norms and human behavior. Civil law has to do with human codes used to achieve social order.

It is our responsibility as church to bring the laws and institutions of our society to account. Immigrants die every day in the attempt to supply their basic needs, and this reality raises serious questions regarding civil laws and their discord with other types of law. According to Martin Luther King, Jr, "An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted either in the eternal law nor in the natural law."

When someone gets into a small boat in the way that Bienvenida did, or crosses borders and walls without the required documentation, this person is not violating civil laws but is obeying the laws of human nature that drives them to find a job to be able to feed their families and to live lives of dignity.

In the majority of countries in the world, crossing the border without papers is not a crime but merely an infraction of administrative regulations. For this reason, it should not be confused with criminal activity or a threat to national security. If we analyze the matter from a more humane point of view, we will realize that immigrants, far from representing a threat, are themselves at risk due to the insecurity that they experience.

We have several examples in the Bible of people who broke civil laws in order to obey the divine law of love: the Hebrew midwives, Rahab, the disciples who gathered grain on the day of rest, and especially Jesus with his healings and ministry that crossed ethnic barriers. The mission of God, in which all of us who are Christian participate, is not simply to help the poor, but to follow Jesus Christ in order to discover that those whom we serve also have much to contribute to us and have many ways to enrich our lives.

The role of the government is to preserve the created order and to serve the common good by developing and applying just policies that protect people and support their well-being. The law has to be just, the government has to be good, and the application must be humane.⁶

Another important theological aspect of the reflection on immigration is the matter of the Earth. Of what "earth" do we speak? Is it not true that the "Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those that inhabit it?" Is the earth a gift or a right? Is it for the benefit of all or is it the exclusive possession of a few? We see the Earth sometimes as the basis of personal and economic security, and for that reason we seek to secure the borders against all whom we think represent a threat to that security. But it is no less true that when our security is based on land, riches, possessions, status, power and other human institutions, that desire of security is demonstrated in our unwillingness to share what we have with others. This is what drives migration, unjust immigration laws, and oppression towards those who migrate. The Christian faith challenges this habitual lack of solidarity. The question is, where does our loyalty as church lie, with the State or with those

⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A social and political resolution toward a compassionate, just, and wise immigration reform*, (Chicago:ELCA, 2010), 2.

who are in need of a place? What is our priority, our belief that this earth is God's house or our nation's? ⁷

Immigration Reform Proposal

In the United States, and by implication in Puerto Rico which is governed by US immigration law, the delays in granting visas for family reunification mean that people often have to wait 15 years or more to be reunited with their families. This drives people to consistently take risks in crossing dangerous borders, exposing themselves to abrupt and forced separation from their families. Many employers do not obey the laws that prohibit them from contracting undocumented workers, because they believe those workers are indispensable. Many resort to an undocumented workforce because it is cheaper, more flexible, hard-working, and will often do work that US citizens would not perform. These employers do not offer benefits, such as the payment of medical insurance or worker's compensation. The employers often evade state and local taxes. Since they are under the threat of detention and deportation, undocumented workers are highly vulnerable to exploitation.

After the attack on September 11, 2001, there was a renewed emphasis on national security, an emphasis especially on border control and the enforcement of immigration law. One of the fears was that relaxed control would allow terrorists to cross the borders illegally. Other concerns have to do with drug trafficking, the entrance of criminals, and gang activity. In the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, immigration issues came to be considered under the rubric of national security, and this created an exaggerated sense that framed undocumented immigrants as security risks.

Women migrants face particular risks and issues. According to the annual report of UNFPA, women constitute almost half of all the persons who migrate globally, 49.6%. The tasks that they can perform run a broad gamut of possibilities: teachers, nurses, domestic workers, housekeeping workers, caregivers for the elderly, farm workers, factory workers, and sex workers. In all of these areas they are subject to exploitation, sexual harassment, human rights violations, trafficking, and even death.

What do we ask as a church?

- Recognition of the right of each person to migrate, a migration that occurs because each wishes to improve his or her standard of living or to flee from deadly situations.
- To seriously consider the fears and the protection that migrants need, so that they will not be abused or discriminated against. On the contrary, they should be received as guests.
- The right families have to live together and to receive the support of the government to make this possible.
- Immigrants have the same right to health care as the rest of the population.
- Defense of workers' rights for immigrants including just pay, just working conditions, and protections that are comparable to other, native workers.
- Equal rights for children to attend schools, free of discrimination and prejudice.
- Rights of migrants to preserve their identity, to speak their language, and to practice their customs. Integration but not assimilation would be encouraged.

Our God defends the immigrants who have no other to defend them. Some day we will have to respond to the One who says, "I was a foreigner and . . . you received me. When did we ever see you as a foreigner, God? If you did it to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me." May God grant that these words be directed to us this and every day.

⁷ Jennifer Riggs, *WCC Theological Reflection On Migration*, (Geneva: WCC), 1-3.

Questions for Reflection

1. What stories of immigrants have you heard of families and individuals arriving to the US? How were those similar or different from Beinvenida's story?
2. What makes a law just or unjust according to the author? Do you agree?
3. "I was a foreigner and...you welcomed me" – what are some ways your congregation welcomes the foreigner and the stranger into the church? The community?

About the Author

Agustina Luvis-Nuñez is a Pentecostal minister, professor and theologian from Puerto Rico. She received a B.S. in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico, a Master's degree in Medical Technology from the Medical Sciences Recint, UPR, an MDiv from the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, a Master's in Theology from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and a PhD from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 2009. She was the National Coordinator of the Women and Gender Justice's Network of Puerto Rico's National Board of the Latin American Council of Churches. Currently, she is the Theology and Church History Professor at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico.