



MERCY AT THE MARGINS

Pope Francis departs from the San Cristobal Cathedral during his visit to Mexico in February 2016. Photo by Marko Vombergar. Used under Creative Commons licence.

The Call of Pope Francis to Welcome Migrants

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

Mercy has been a central theme of Pope Francis' pontificate since its beginning. In his first homily as pope, he proclaimed that mercy is the Lord's most powerful message.¹ In another homily a few weeks later, Francis said, "Dear brothers and sisters, let us be enveloped by the mercy of God ... We will feel his wonderful tenderness; we will feel his embrace, and we too will become more capable of mercy, patience, forgiveness, and love."²

On April 11, 2014, Pope Francis declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy, which began Sunday, December 8, 2015. He begins the document that formally announced the jubilee, *Misericordiae Vultus* (*The Face of Mercy*), with words that "sum up" the Christian faith: "Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy." He goes on to urge that the "balm of mercy reach everyone as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst," and that to live and testify to mercy is absolutely essential to the credibility of the Church's message.³

Francis' long-standing concern for vulnerable people and the indifference and hypocrisy that push people to the margins is evident in *Misericordiae Vultus* as in many of his other pronouncements:

"In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates ... Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!"⁴

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Reflecting on the meaning of these words in the U.S. context, consider how our broken immigration system has forced millions of immigrants without authorization to live on the margins of U.S. society despite the fact that our economy depends on their labor. Or how the “war on drugs” led to the hyper-incarceration of people of color and undermined countless families and communities. In this election year it is distressing to witness the way the hypocrisy and egoism of politicians is poisoning the discourse on immigration.

Early in his presidential campaign, Donald Trump labeled Mexican immigrants rapists and murderers only to see his poll numbers actually increase! Ted Cruz repeatedly called upon the “Body of Christ” to rise up and vote for him in his race for the presidency, and he excoriated other candidates for even considering a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants. After the Paris terrorist attacks, over 30 U.S. governors voiced opposition to admitting Syrian refugees for resettlement in their states.

Unfortunately, such hard-hearted attitudes and policies toward immigrants and refugees have a long history in our country.

The Federalists’ fear that French and French-sympathizing immigrants posed a threat to private property and political stability led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, which gave the president arbitrary powers to deport foreigners deemed dangerous.⁵ Large waves of German and Irish immigrants, mostly Catholic, in the 1830s-40s spurred a frightening backlash. The Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Mass.,

was set on fire in 1842, and 30 people were killed in an anti-Catholic riot in Philadelphia in 1844.⁶ When a company hired 14 Russian Jews in a mill town in New Jersey in 1891, 500 residents rampaged through the Jewish sector, forcing most to flee.⁷ In the early 1830s, 8,000 to 20,000 Irish immigrants are



Tens of thousands of people greet Pope Francis at the “Meeting With Young People” at the José María Morelos Pavon Stadium on February 16, 2016. Photo by Marko Vombegar. Used under Creative Commons license.

estimated to have perished from yellow fever, cholera, and malaria while clearing swampland to dig the New Basin Canal in New Orleans. Many died on the job, and their bodies were simply pushed to the side and buried in the canal’s levee. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S. The descendants of forced migrants from Africa were not guaranteed U.S. citizenship until the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1868.

An indication of how deeply Pope Francis wants others to heed Christ’s call for love and mercy for immigrants and refugees is his request that every parish in Europe take in a refugee family, including the Vatican’s two parishes. He made good on that promise when he brought three families of Syrian refugees back with him after a visit to a refugee camp in Greece in April.⁸

On the 2016 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the Pope welcomed over

6,000 migrants who had gathered in St. Peter’s Square.⁹ In his message for the occasion, Pope Francis noted, “At the heart of the Gospel of mercy the encounter and acceptance by others are intertwined with the encounter and acceptance of God.” He asked us to remember, “Migrants and refugees are our brothers and sisters in search of a better life ... people whose dignity is to be protected and who are capable of contributing to progress and the general welfare.” He counseled migrants and refugees not to let themselves “be robbed of the hope and joy of life born of your experience of God’s mercy, as manifested in the people you meet on your journey!” The Pope also recognized that migration has become a structural reality and that our primary concern for the world’s refugee crisis should

be providing programs that address the root causes of migration and the change this will require ...¹⁰

Perhaps at long last the U.S. has heard that message. In the 2016 federal budget, \$750 million have been appropriated to address the systemic problems of violence, poor governance, and lack of economic opportunity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that are driving migration from those countries. The Washington Office on Latin America is “cautiously optimistic” that this significant increase in assistance to the region will lead to real change. This optimism is because several preconditions require the targeted countries to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening the rule of law and addressing poverty, corruption, and inequality before funds are released to them.¹¹

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pope Francis, Homily, Holy Mass in the Parish of St. Anna in the Vatican, March 17, 2013.
- ² Pope Francis, Homily, Papal Mass for the Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome, April 7, 2013, no. 3.
- ³ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, April 11, 2015, no. 1.
- ⁴ Pope Francis, *Ibid.*, no. 15.
- ⁵ Cycles of Nativism in U.S. History, August, 2001, at <http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/1025/cyclesnativism.pdf> (Originally prepared by James Crawford for the National Immigration Forum.)
- ⁶ A. James Rudin, "Americans have a long history of negative policies towards refugees, immigrants," Religion News Service, November 23, 2015, at <http://www.religionnews.com/2015/11/18/americans-long-history-negative-policies-toward-refugees-immigrants-commentary/>
- ⁷ Robert Slayton, "Immigrants New and Old," Huffington Post, January 27, 2016 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-slayton/immigrants-old-and-new_b_9068728.html?utm_hp_ref=politics&ir=Politics
- ⁸ Jim Yardley, "Pope Francis takes 12 refugees back to Vatican after trip to Greece," *New York Times*, April 16, 2016, at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/world/europe/pope-francis-visits-lesbos-heart-of-europes-refugee-crisis.html?_r=0
- ⁹ Elise Harris, "Every migrant has a story and culture of value, Pope Francis says," Catholic News Agency, January 17, 2016 at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/every-migrant-has-a-story-and-culture-of-value-pope-francis-says-87707/>

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- ¹⁰ The Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, January 17, 2016
- ¹¹ Washington Office on Latin America, "U.S. Increases Central America Aid, But It's No Blank Check," Dec. 22, 2015, at http://www.wola.org/commentary/congress_increases_central_america_aid_but_it_s_no_blank_check

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- ⁸ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Chart Book: TANF at 19*, Revised August 20, 2015, p. 12.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Brown and Michelle K. Derr, *Serving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Recipients in a Post-Recession Environment*, Mathematica Policy Research, OPRE Report 2015-05, February 2015, p. 3.
- ¹² "From FY2007 to FY2012, SNAP participation increased by 89.4 percent, compared to a 7 percent increase in TANF." *Ibid.*
- ¹³ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (1986), nos. 206-214, emphasis in original.

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