



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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MAKING MERCY MATTER

The Call of Pope Francis to Welcome Migrants

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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 Vombergar. 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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Catholic Social Thought and Human Dignity

Human creation in the “image and likeness of God” (*Genesis 1:26*)—the foundation for Catholic social thought (CST)—involves the dignity of the human person as found in various philosophies. But in CST, human dignity is incredibly elevated in that we humans are capable of intimate relationships with God and sanctified by Christ’s salvific grace. This transcendent dignity depends not on any accomplishment, education, wealth, race, or nation. It is not taken away by birth defect, disease, crime, poverty, or membership in any suspect group. Human dignity necessarily involves human life, rights, development, and empowerment.

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Human life. In *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Saint John Paul II focused on the inviolability of human life and proclaimed a gospel of life over a culture of death [12].¹ The Pontiff argued that the right to life was the most basic human right [2]. Without defending the right to life, we cannot further the common good because it is the right to life “upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop” [101]. John Paul condemned murder [57], procured abortion [58], euthanasia [65], and capital punishment (except where the death penalty is the only way to defend society; but “such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent” [56]).

Human rights. From human life and dignity, the CST tradition developed human rights, reaching a high point in affirming civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) by Saint John XXIII. Rights actually give content to human dignity in relationship to persons, systems, and structures. Some rights protect human dignity “in its bodiliness: the right to life, bodily integrity, food, clothing, shelter, and some minimum degree of health care.”² Other rights relate to being able to work, free economic initiative, adequate

working conditions, and just wages.³ Still others, such as the rights to assembly and association, defend our dignity in social interactions.⁴

Integral human development. In the context of the development of nations, Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) put forward a broad, complex, and demanding concept of development. Not just economic, development must be integral in two senses: the whole person and every person. Development engages the individual in personal responsibility for self-fulfillment. To achieve authentic development we must move “from less human conditions to those which are more human”: from material deprivation of life’s essentials, the moral deficiencies of selfishness, and oppressive social structures ... to the possession of necessities, knowledge, culture, respect for others’ dignity, cooperation, a desire for peace, and spiritual values [21].

Empowerment. Catholic thought has evolved from just protecting workers and the poor to promoting their empowerment as “artisans of their own destiny”⁵—individually, as workers and citizens, and as poor nations.

Empowerment is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individuals, families, organizations, and communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental, positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives.⁶

This understanding stands on three principles: (1) people are the primary agents of change; (2) empowering changes happen through participative relationships; and (3) the human person is both social and spiritual; what affects one aspect of the person, affects the other.⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in the respective documents.

² David Hollenbach, S.J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 95.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), no. 65. Pope Benedict XVI deepened the concept of integral human development in *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009.

⁶ A Catholic Charities Framework for Empowerment, Catholic Charities USA, 1998.

⁷ *Ibid.*



Shredded Safety Net

Twenty Years of Failed "Welfare Reform"

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

In 1996 the Newt Gingrich-led Congress adopted the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) "welfare reform" plan, signed into law by President Clinton. It ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program first adopted during the Depression to provide a safety net for families with children living in poverty and initially without the support of one or both parents. TANF's first two purposes were to: "(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage..."¹ This article examines the record on those two goals in light of Catholic social thought.

TANF shifted from a "categorical assistance" approach (if you fall within the eligibility guidelines, you are legally entitled to assistance at the level set by the state) to a block grant approach (the federal government sets a fixed amount of funding for the states to use for a variety of services and supports). Under TANF, states determine, within federal parameters, the scope of benefits and the allocation of spending to various services including the levels of financial assistance to families, work requirements, and new federal time limits (e.g. five-year lifetime limit). Under both TANF and AFDC, states were required to match the federal funding at various levels depending on state levels of poverty and wealth. States might use the TANF block grant for income assistance, child care, education

and job training, transportation, aid to children at risk, and other services. Ideally, states would use this flexibility to move more people from welfare to work as a result of individualized planning and supervision.

The total federal block grant has been set at \$16.5 billion for every year since 1996. As a result, "its real value has fallen by one-third due to inflation."² The state share of funding, on the other hand, was fixed at 80 percent of their 1994 contribution to the AFDC program. "The amount states are required to spend (at the 80 percent level) in 2013 is about half of the amount they spent on AFDC-related programs in 1994, after adjusting for inflation."³ The combination of "flat" federal grants and reduced state contributions, together with adjustments for inflation, reveals the first major weakness of the 1996 "reform"—significantly less money for poor families regardless of the state of the economy or, more importantly, the breadth and depth of poverty in this country. As a result, the percentage of low-income families receiving cash assistance under TANF has declined from 68 of every 100 families with children in poverty in 1996 to just 23 in 2014.

An equally or more disturbing trend is the growing number of states with TANF-to-Poverty Rates (TPR) of 10 or less, meaning that fewer than 10 percent of families with children in poverty are receiving cash assistance. Included in the Gulf South are Louisiana (4.2), Mississippi (9.7), and Texas (4.9).⁴

Children in Deep Poverty

“Deep poverty” is defined as those with incomes below half of the poverty line; in 2013 the deep poverty line was \$11,917 for a family of four.⁵ AFDC, the predecessor to TANF, was instrumental in reaching families, particularly those with children and those in deep poverty; TANF has failed dramatically to do so. “While AFDC lifted more than 2 million children out of deep poverty in 1995, TANF lifted only 629,000 children out of deep poverty in 2010.”⁶ If the number of such children had declined in this period, this might be defensible; but the number of U.S. households living in “extreme poverty” (a U.N. measure of households living on \$2 or less per person per day, even lower than “deep poverty”) in any given month “more than doubled between 1996 and 2011, from 636,000 to 1.46 million; the number of children living in such households also doubled from 1.4 million to 2.8 million.”⁷

Work Requirements

One of the key purposes of the passage of TANF was to move people from welfare-to-work, aiming to end the so-called dependency of poor families on “welfare” (what most people called AFDC). Proponents point to early gains in the employment of never-married mothers in the first years of TANF. However, the longer term picture, reflected in Figure 1,⁸ below, gives a very different impression.

As Figure 1 reveals, in the 1990s the gap in employment rates between never-married mothers and single women of similar educational levels actually closed—but that trend

began several years before TANF. Even that improvement, however, cannot be credited largely to TANF. “Rigorous research suggests, however, that a strong labor market and the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) played an even greater role” than TANF in the gains in the 1990s.⁹ As Figure 1 indicates, however, the employment levels of both groups of women have steadily declined in the new century despite TANF and *the employment level of never-married mothers in 2013 and in 1996 (the year TANF was adopted) are roughly the same.*

One explanation for the weakness of the welfare-to-work momentum of TANF is the long-term failure of states, after initial modest increases, to sustain investment in helping recipients with job training, job readiness, and work. “Overall, states spent only 8 percent of their state and federal TANF funds on work activities in 2014 ... 16 percent of these funds on child care ... [and] about a third of their TANF funds on other services such as child welfare, early education, afterschool programs, and college financial aid ...”¹⁰ Many states have used the federal block grant funds to replace state spending in these categories, allowing state dollars to be moved to other budgets.

Another obvious explanation is the significant reduction in TANF caseloads from AFDC levels even though there are millions more families living in deep poverty and extreme poverty. Even in the worst days of the Great Recession of 2008 and the slow recovery from it, TANF caseloads increased only “modestly”¹¹ in contrast to programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)¹² and Medicaid. We are a far cry from the “*thorough reform of the nation’s welfare and income support programs,*” which the U.S. Bishops have called for, and their principles for comprehensive coverage, adequate levels of support, national eligibility standards, and a national minimum benefit level.¹³

Figure 1

Never-Married Mothers’ Work Rates Jumped in 1990s but Have Fallen Since

Percent of women between the ages of 20 and 49 with a high school education or less with any work during the year



Source: CBPP analysis of Current Population Survey.

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Not All Tax Credits Are Created Equal

The Success of the Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credits

BY JEANIE DONOVAN, M.P.A., M.P.H.

In 2007, the Louisiana Legislature enacted a set of innovative tax incentives known as the School Readiness Tax Credits (SRTC) that remain in effect today. Now, as the state faces a budget crisis, eliminating various tax credits may be one strategy legislators use to balance the budget and increase tax revenue in future years. While some tax credits may not survive because they have not had the intended economic impacts or because they have too high a price tag, the SRTC package must be preserved.

The Investment: The SRTC Package

Family Credit

Provides a tax credit to low-income working parents who purchase early care and education (ECE) services at a center with at least a two-star quality rating on the state's five-star Quality Start scale. The amount of the credit increases with a greater number of stars but decreases with the parents' income.

Provider Credit

Provides a tax credit to ECE providers that have at least a two-star quality rating. The total credit received by the program is based on the number of

low-income children served and the number of stars the provider has earned.

Teacher & Director Credit

Provides a tax credit to ECE teachers and directors who have attained higher training and education and are employed in ECE centers participating in the state's Quality Start rating system.

Business Credit

Provides a tax credit to businesses that support quality ECE or make donations to child care resource and referral agencies that provide training and technical assistance to ECE centers and parents of young children.

The Returns

The SRTCs stimulate the state's ECE sector, which is an extensive network of 10,400 providers that create jobs and earnings in their local economies in addition to providing vital child care to more than 203,000 children.² These small businesses employ 21,817 local workers, many without higher education, who in turn spend their earnings at retailers in their communities, resulting in an

School Readiness Tax Credit Costs ¹

Fiscal Year	Family Credit	ECE Provider Credit	ECE Teacher & Director Credit	Business Child Care Support Credit	Total
2014	\$2,216,363	\$3,959,567	\$5,721,082	\$923,256	\$12,820,268
2013	\$2,120,539	\$4,619,012	\$6,816,865	\$892,720	\$14,449,136
2012	\$1,649,510	\$3,961,235	\$5,396,623	\$523,291	\$11,530,659

economic multiplier effect.³ A 2015 economic analysis found that every dollar spent in the Louisiana ECE sector returns \$1.78 to the economy. The same analysis found that for every job created in ECE, 1.3 jobs are created in the larger economy.⁴ In total, the Louisiana ECE sector generates \$830 million in direct and indirect economic activity annually.⁵

The SRTCs also help low-income parents afford quality care for their children, which helps those families achieve self-sufficiency. There is a connection between the ability of parents to afford child care and participation in the work force. Researchers at the University of Kentucky's Center for Poverty Research found that a 10 percent increase in the cost of ECE reduces employment of single mothers by 3 to 4 percent and that of married women by 5 to 6 percent.⁶ In 2014, 47 percent of Louisiana children were living in a single-parent family, and women headed most of those families.⁷ Single mothers are more likely to participate in the labor force than married mothers and therefore are most in need of assistance with the cost of ECE. In fact, 70 percent of single mothers in Louisiana were employed in 2014 but had a median income of just \$20,644.^{8,9} The average annual cost of quality child care is \$113 per week or \$5,650 per year.¹⁰ By returning a portion of ECE costs to low-income working parents, the SRTC parent credit provides a modest but critical economic boost to those families.¹¹

Finally, the SRTCs increase low-income children's access to high-quality ECE programs, which are linked to improved short- and long-term academic outcomes. Only 48 percent of children from low-income families are school-ready at age 5 compared to 75 percent of children from families with moderate and high income.¹² While many factors influence whether a child is prepared to enter kindergarten, attending quality ECE programs has been shown to significantly improve school readiness rates.¹³ What's more, research shows that children who are adequately prepared for kindergarten also are more successful in grade school, are less likely to drop out of high school, and earn more as adults.¹⁴

Based on their impressive returns on investment, the nationally recognized SRTCs have proved to be worth the modest cost to the state each year. Although Louisiana faces a significant budget shortfall in the upcoming fiscal year, state lawmakers must continue to seek ways to further strengthen the ECE industry and empower parents to remain in the work force.

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