

The papacy of Pope Francis has brought new energy and excitement to many in the Church. The Franciscan community gladly joins him in his call for a new evangelization. In this spirit, Holy Name Province has prepared a number of brief reflections on elements of Pope Francis' statements and writings, particularly "Evangelii Gaudium."

The Immigrant Poor in the Eyes of "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel")

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Faces of the Poor and Strangers in Our Midst

Ellen came to the U.S. on a tourist visa and over stayed. She is employed illegally but she needed the money for medical treatment for her very ill father. She makes well below minimum wage but cannot complain for fear that her employer will report her to immigration. Now, her father is dying and Ellen wants to go home. But if she leaves, she risks not being allowed to come back to the U.S.

Luisa came on a fiancée visa with a promise from her now husband to petition for her citizenship. Since coming to the U.S. five years ago, her husband has been physically abusive. Luisa's husband has confiscated her passport and threatens to have her deported if she leaves him.

With no opportunities back home, Ana Maria spent a lot of money to pay the coyote (organized crime that traffics people across the U.S. borders) to get her into the U.S. On the U.S. side, Ana Maria was kept in a "safe house" where her traffickers sexually abused her. At a certain point, Ana Maria's traffickers allowed her to go to church. She sought refuge at the church but continues to hide from her traffickers who want to take her back.

These are the faceless and nameless poor immigrants who we encounter in our streets. They take the subways and buses with us, they work in convenience stores and local car washes. They are the struggling immigrants and strangers in our midst whose plight for survival is alien to us.

"Evangelii Gaudium" and the Immigrant Poor

Mindful of the plight of poor immigrants, the Catholic Church across the U.S. maintains an open arms policy. The Church is at the forefront of the campaign for Comprehensive Immigration Reform through the creation of Justice for Immigrants, the U.S. Catholic Bishops' immigration campaign body.

In his latest exhortation, "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel"), Pope Francis indicates that the mission of the Church is to evangelize; that is, "to make the kingdom of God present in our world" today (sic). He insists that this mission to evangelize must include a social dimension; without it "there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization (par. 176)."

Centered on charity, our profession of faith must lead to our commitment to society "to desire, seek and protect the good of others (par. 178)." The Pope encourages all Christians to a "renewed personal encounter with Jesus," an encounter that nourishes and authenticates one's faith through action (par. 5). In essence, we are called to be in solidarity with the poor of the world.

The papal exhortation does not explicitly single out immigrants but when it speaks about the poor having "a special place in God's people," it includes immigrants. "God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself 'became poor' (2 Cor. 8:9), (par. 197)." Clearly, there is a special place in God's heart for Ellen, Luisa, Ana Maria and countless, other faceless and nameless immigrants.

The Pope is emphatic in saying, "the Church has made an option for the poor that is understood as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity'...they have so much to teach us. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (198)."

These are powerful words that help the Migrant Center at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in New York City (<http://www.stfrancisnyc.org/migrantcenter>) see its vision and mission as it engages countless immigrants seeking assistance. For the Migrant Center, like the larger Franciscan and Christian community, this engagement gives life to the words "we need to let ourselves be evangelized by them...to lend our voices to their causes," an engagement that opens hearts and minds to the mystery of God's presence in them, the God who walks with them in their struggles for survival and the God who weeps with them when they are abused, oppressed and exploited.