

Signs of the Times: Pursuit of Life, Liberty at Heart of Migration Issue

by Julian Jagudilla, OFM | June 17, 2016 |



The essay below is the seventh in a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the United States.

These reflections are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations involved with creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. Because it is hoped that this initiative generate dialogue, friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of the essays in the series. These reflections do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

No human being is illegal! Referring to another human being as illegal is dehumanizing. Regardless of the circumstances, reasons, or motivations for a person coming into another country, or whether the entrance is lawful or unlawful, no human being deserves such a designation. The tendency may have as its origin the fact that those without papers are termed “illegal aliens” by governments, but the action remains unacceptable. Our Franciscan charism calls us to recognize and revere the inherent dignity of the human person and incite others to do the same. A guttural fear of strangers “taking over” — stealing jobs, and diluting this country’s way of life — fuels the anti-immigrant sentiment and results in the marginalization of those who do not look or sound “like the rest of us.” Dissenting voices must be heard.

America was established by our founders as a place of refuge and was built up by many waves of peoples coming from other countries in search of a better life. *E pluribus Unum* (out of many, one) — our nation’s motto — continues to model our country as every day thousands enter its ports and cross its borders — most lawfully and some unlawfully. The underlying question should be, “Why are these people coming to a country like America?” The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests an answer to this question.

Article three of the UN declaration states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” When these rights are not upheld, people are forced to migrate. When a government fails to provide for the economic life of its people, people leave for better opportunities; when a government fails to safeguard the basic freedoms of its citizenry, people flee to other countries where human freedoms are respected and guaranteed; and when political, religious freedoms are violated and peoples’ lives are in danger, people seek refuge in other countries where diverse political and religious beliefs are tolerated.

Causes of migration

Economic security – that pursuit of stable and abundant life for oneself and one’s family – is still the primary reason people migrate. Human trafficking, which generally is associated with the sex business, now has been linked to promises of economic security in the form of “lucrative jobs.” Victims discover too late that these jobs are non-existent, and that they have been fraudulently recruited and transported to situations worse than those in their countries of origin. All of this is encountered in the pursuit of the proverbial “American dream.” Allowing these people to come out of the shadows and enter the U.S. in the light of day would do much to dismantle the human trafficking trade and enable them to pursue a better life.

Those who are displaced by war and violence, and those who suffer persecution because of their political stances, religious beliefs and/or sexual preference also flee their countries of origin. Still others are forced to leave their homes, lands and livelihood because of environmental degradation, both human-induced and naturally occurring.

It is true that as a sovereign nation, the U.S. has a right to maintain its borders, but these compelling immigration “push” factors must be considered. As a nation formed to be a beacon of hope to the poor and downtrodden, we must work to allow as many in as we are able.

From welcoming to being companions

Following the example of the Poor Man of Assisi, we Franciscans are called to welcome and embrace the strangers among us, the poor and those marginalized by society. We must open our arms to migrants, immigrants and refugees, these faces of the stranger.

Welcoming these newcomers does not simply mean opening the doors of our churches or providing them the church’s basement or the seldom-used church halls so that they can celebrate liturgy in their native language. Welcoming means walking with people and accompanying them on their journey. As their companions, we unite with them in their struggles and sufferings. We feel their pain and sorrow; we stand and speak with them.

Concretely, we advocate for their rights and privileges – such advocacy is not just a political exercise but a moral imperative with a scriptural basis: *When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God (Leviticus 19: 33-34).* Advocacy for their rights and welfare includes working for the passage of pro-immigrant legislation.

Recently, many in the Franciscan family and their allied organizations gathered in a conference to deepen their engagement in the issue of migration. The one-day conference — called “Franciscan Common Ground” promoted the idea of building a network of information and support for and with migrants and migrant advocates. The [“Franciscan Common Ground” website](#) also provides resources.

Through this network of information and support, the Franciscan family unites its voice in advocating for their immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters. We do this through:

Prayer and finding concrete ways to put into practice the Gospel imperative to care and protect them (*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35*); **learning** and keeping updated on the latest policies and laws affecting immigrants and refugees and the causes that force people to move; **assisting** individuals and families on the move by taking part in efforts to ensure their protection and integration into the society; and **participating** in local and national advocacy initiatives, especially those undertaken by the Franciscan family.

As Franciscans, as we continue to advocate for immigrants and refugee brothers and sisters, we should never cease to analyze why some countries are poor and unstable politically and economically while others are blessed with affluence and power. When we are able to find connections to this fundamental dichotomy and to find a means to level the field, only then will our advocacy be Franciscan and Christian.

— Fr. Julian, a native of the Philippines, is director of the Migrant Center at St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York City.