

## INVITED GROUPS

- Topic: Strangers in a Strange Land:  
Christian Responses to Migrants and Refugees
- Moderator: William C. Spohn, Santa Clara University
- Presenters: Richard J. Ryscavage, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA  
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The current historical crisis of migrants and refugees presents Christians with novel challenges. There are 100 million migrants worldwide, of whom approximately 22 million are refugees, who have fled their countries from fear of persecution. More than 25 million internally displaced persons fall outside the protection of the international refugee regime. Although wars traditionally produced refugees as a side effect, increasingly military operations are directly aimed at "ethnic cleansing." One in ten persons currently living in the United States was born elsewhere.

Ryscavage placed this crisis in a theological perspective. The categories of social justice do not exhaust the issue of migrants and refugees; instead, Judaism should be seen as "the first religion of journey." Jesus' wandering ministry follows this pattern, as do the theological motifs of Exodus and pilgrimage central to the tradition. Catholic social teaching has built a strong case for the right to migrate, centered on the value of keeping the family intact. This right takes precedence over the right of sovereign states to exclude immigrants. Migration rights are not absolute, since they are limited by common good considerations in both sending and receiving countries. Nevertheless, "the rights of sovereignty cannot trump human dignity." John Paul II's prolific writings on these issues stress two themes: first, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish refugees from the internally displaced and from economic migrants. Secondly, international treaties need to provide greater protection for peoples on the move. In fact, "there are no original peoples on this earth," since all have migrated to their present locations.

O'Neill analyzed the philosophical rationales behind the debate over "illegal immigrants," a curious phrase that designates persons rather than behavior as illegal. The debate over California's 1994 Proposition 187 revealed deep philosophical rifts. Opponents of immigration used the rhetoric of "member/stranger" often found in communitarian ethics, where membership is the primary human good we offer one another (Michael Walzer). Those opposed to the anti-immigration initiative employed the trope of "citizen/alien" and relied on

liberal appeals to procedural liberties and a sovereign self that has precedence over natural or historical ties to others (John Rawls). The debate ignored the humanity of migrants, considering them exclusively as contributing to the economy or draining its resources.

Catholic social teaching sees migrants under a different "root metaphor," namely as "near and distant neighbors." Attention to the "stranger in your midst is the hermeneutical key to the love command in the Old Testament." It goes beyond the Golden Rule's teaching on reciprocity, as does Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where "the neighbor" is not the object of care but a claim made on the agent. Catholic teaching's insistence on rights as the necessary conditions for effective participation in the community surpasses the communitarians' "respect for the other as other" and the liberals' "respect for the other as individual." Rights of migrants have to be considered under the rubric of the universal common good rather than that of a single state.

Chabolla also drew on the Proposition 187 debate and the pastoral response of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. A slim majority of Catholics voted for the initiative despite the opposition of California's bishops. Moral and religious considerations were often ignored as the issue was reduced to "people breaking the law."

Pastoral responses to the fortification of the Mexican border and other attempts to limit the flow of undocumented immigrants include: providing social services for migrants' basic material needs, welcoming cultural expressions of faith, work with changing neighborhoods, regularizing the legal status of immigrants, bringing the experience of migrants to the awareness of other Catholics, educating for English literacy and community organizing, and advocating change in public policy. The greatest challenge is to make an "ethos of public discipleship" credible to Catholic citizens. This ethos places priority on solidarity over private interest, neighborliness over individualism, and the common good over a culture of consumption.

The Catholic church has distinct advantages in the policy arena. It has the power to convene diverse groups of people, it has rich pastoral experience to draw upon, and it has the untapped potential of its broad constituency. "The Church is the only institution that has a dominant place at the center and at the periphery of U. S. culture." The challenge is how to provide for "formation as apprenticeship for a relational culture" that is consonant with Christian discipleship. How can church leaders assist this formation prior to the emergence of divisive political debates such as that around Prop. 187? By that point people often balk at what is perceived as being told how to vote. As one frustrated business leader complained in a discussion on Prop. 187, "I'm sick and tired of being told that I have to love my neighbor!"

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