

“I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me ...”

Dear Friends in Christ,

When I was named bishop of Little Rock, the first question I was asked was about the human rights of undocumented immigrants. This is an issue that is close to my heart and very important to many of the Catholics of Arkansas. As you know, I come from Oklahoma where last year some very harmful legislation was enacted, mainly due to fear and certainly without any consideration of what Jesus and what our Christian faith has to say about this matter. It is my hope that the Arkansas legislature, which convenes in January, will have the courage and wisdom to do what is right, to do what Jesus would do, to do the loving thing. But of course our legislators are just like the rest of us, and so the place to begin is with ourselves, our own hearts and our own parishes, and our own discomfort in dealing with another culture and immigrant group, our own fear that we're going to lose something somehow...say fear of losing our identity or our control of the situation and we forget about the human dignity and the human rights of the other person. The defense of human rights is a necessary component of our Catholic faith and so I have decided to make this the topic of my first pastoral letter as bishop of Little Rock.

So let's start with the meaning of today's feast of Christ the King. You remember what Jesus said in Mt 22:21: *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar but give to God what belongs to God*, meaning that what Christ our king says come first. And Christ is not just our king, he will also be our judge—and what did he say in the Gospel you just heard? *“Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world...for I was a stranger and you welcomed me” ... “When did we welcome you away from home?” ... “As often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it for me... Out of my sight,*

you condemned, into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! ...for I was away from home and you gave me no welcome”... ”When did we see you away from home... and not attend you in your needs?”... ”As often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me.” These will go off to eternal punishment and the just to eternal life.

You couldn't ask for a clearer statement from Jesus than that! Your eternal destiny depends on whether you welcome the stranger or not. In my pastoral letter and accompanying study guide I address four basic principles:

1. The economic principle of supply & demand and the fact that national borders have almost never prevented immigration when there were strong economic reasons for migration. Expelling 12 million people is not a realistic option historically, economically or socially. Our only real choice is whether to facilitate this process for the common good or try to create as much misery as possible—and reap the undesirable consequences. Most Americans do not realize the impossible barriers placed on people who want to enter our country legally, which I explain in the letter. People don't want to be undocumented, they enter our country without papers because they have no other choice.

2. The moral principle that people have a God-given right to immigrate when circumstances so require. Our Declaration of Independence says: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.* The right to immigrate derives from our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Since they come from God, no government has the authority to deny us these rights or apply them in a selective or discriminatory manner. On the other hand, unlike the right to life itself, which is absolute, all other rights are limited by the common good and so there are instances where the common good might prevent or restrict immigration.

3. The theological principle of the common good, the shared good of all residents in our community, our nation, and by extension the entire human family. In this document I address how national borders serve the common good and the implications of undocumented immigration for the rule of law—and what we can do to set things right.

4. To these 3 intellectual principles discussed in the pastoral letter, I add a 4th spiritual principle in the accompanying study guide to help us now move from our heads down into our hearts, which is where conversion occurs. For those of us who are American citizens, this includes acknowledging the pain and suffering that has occurred because of our country's current immigration policies. What Jesus is challenging us to do here regarding immigration is to let him share his heart and mind with us. All that I have to say really boils down to Jesus' call for us to love as he loves, without fear, trusting in God's providence. To help us do this, I have three things to offer:

1. A 2 page summary outline of the main points of the letter. This outline gives us a brief overview of the entire document and will be distributed to all the Catholics of the diocese after Mass or in their parish bulletin this weekend.

2. The full text of my pastoral letter. This has already been published in its entirety in the Arkansas Catholic and on line at the Diocese of Little Rock web site. Printed copies will also be made available after this Mass for those parishioners interested in reading the whole 32 page document, which I heartily recommend. I think the footnotes and appendices to this document will be eye-openers for many of us.

3. A 3 week study guide designed to help us connect personally with the teaching of the Church regarding immigration and human rights. This study guide is designed for use by all the different groups in our parishes, hopefully during the Advent or Christmas

seasons. For example: Why Catholic? Groups, youth groups, women's groups, prayer groups, the Knights of Columbus, religious education classes, Confirmation classes, RCIA, parish committees, etc. Study group participants will need a copy of the full text of the pastoral letter. Advent is a time of longing and expectation, a time of hope. Jesus' parents found no warm welcome in Bethlehem, no room in the inn. The study guide will lead us to ask what changes we need to make in our nation, in our parishes and in our own hearts to ensure that today's Marys and Josephs—today's Marías and Josés—receive from us a warm welcome truly worthy of the Savior whose birth we celebrate on Christmas.

One of the constant features of the history of American immigration is the process of conversion whereby the receiving population learns to soften its heart and open its arms to welcome the newcomer. As we have seen with the earlier waves of immigrants, this process takes time—time for the immigrants to assimilate and time for the receiving population to become comfortable with the newcomers. Yesterday's immigrants faced many of the same obstacles that now confront immigrants today--we are astonished today to read of the mean-spiritedness of the "Irish need not apply" signs of the 1800s. But we are also edified by the poem by Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty which concludes with the words:

"Give me your tired, your poor, // Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, // The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. // Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, // I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

One of the most distinguishing features of our Catholic faith is that we are called to be "universal" in fact as well as in name. This means that there must be no dividing

lines within our parishes, no second-class parishioners—all are welcome, no exceptions. But there's more to it than that. You and I are being offered a unique and privileged opportunity to share the mind and heart of Jesus Christ, the same Jesus whom we honor with so many images of the Sacred Heart, his heart visible, crowned with thorns and on fire with love. And that's who he now invites us to be, Christ for others. In this, God will use us to be a not only light to our nation (enlightening others about human rights in the abstract—the way of truth and life) but also more importantly a source of love, love that banishes fear, love that brings hope and healing, and in this way become a model for what all of American society is called to be.