

Presentation by Bp. John Stowe, OFM Conv., Diocese of Lexington
Center for Migration Studies (CMS) Conference on Promoting Just and
Inclusive Communities in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana: A “Whole of
Community” Approach to Immigrants and Refugees

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I am delighted to see passionate and committed people gathered to promote just and inclusive communities in our three states, especially in this climate of enhanced danger for immigrants and refugees. As the leader of a minority faith community in Central and Eastern Kentucky, I have been truly inspired by the grassroots efforts of small groups of people who have learned what it means to “love your neighbor” and how to exercise the mercy and compassion that Jesus demonstrates throughout his earthly ministry. In some of our small, rural communities, people of faith were horrified to discover that the people who served them at a local restaurant could disappear overnight - into detention or deportation. When given the opportunity, they stepped up to sign power-of-attorney papers for their neighbors’ and friends’ children in case some day those neighbors and friends are taken away by ICE enforcement. I have also been inspired by a pastor in a rural community who now makes it part of his daily routine to bring food and other necessities to an immigrant family whose main breadwinner has been taken into custody, leaving a wife to try to raise little children and also work to provide for the family.

As much as I am convinced of the power of the Gospel and confirmed in my faith in the goodness of people when I see this kind of practical charity in action; I am profoundly disturbed that this kind of activity is needed in our nation at this time. The folks who are stepping forward in loving kindness have discovered that there is a huge difference between really knowing the plight of a neighbor and seeing the real consequences and suffering of children and families, and hearing fear-inspiring rhetoric from talking heads who speak 24 hours a day about an “invasion” and the threats to our safety coming across the border. I believe that it is critical for churches and community organizers and all people of good will to humanize the issue of immigration, to tell stories and introduce real people’s experience into the public consciousness if we want to bring about real and lasting change in the treatment of immigrants and strangers in our country.

At this moment, I think it is important to take stock of where we are. In recent weeks we have seen an unimaginable kind of human cruelty, a kind that has lasting

repercussions for the vulnerable individuals involved, being carried out as a matter of national policy. Who would believe that in the land of the free and the home of the brave, we would be so threatened by penniless, shoeless migrants who have traveled hundreds of miles to escape gangs, violence and brutal poverty? What kind of national security requires the separation of children from their parents? Even as we acknowledge the horror of this, I do not want to lose sight of what else we have seen: the great outcry, the treks to the border by the influential, the persistence of the media, the leaking of pictures and audio files of the heart-rending cries of children separated from their parents, all of which has provoked a reaction – a reaction that we as Americans, we as a people and as a nation, do not want to be identified with cruelty, do not want to be identified as a nation that locks up children, that loses vulnerable children in a broken system, that allows children to be warehoused and penned in like livestock behind chain-linked fences. Even a president who has trained his ears to only hear a certain portion of the population could not be shielded from the outcries.

Encountering the human faces and cries of the victims of unjust immigration enforcement, and the organized insistence that these faces be encountered has brought about some relief, and the emphasis must be on *some*. Now we must continue to raise those voices and continue to insist that family incarceration is not a solution – and that family incarceration is still the incarceration of children. We cannot let up or allow the public to become accustomed to tent cities on military bases, asylum seekers turned away at the border, and families with and without children, held in detention. Nor do we want to see the families who are escaping violence be sent back to the very places they risked everything to escape.

On the one hand, we should acknowledge gratefully that the outcry of the nation was swift, if not unanimous. The age of instant communication worked well to place egregious injustice in front of us unrelentingly and provoked a reaction. But...the “zero tolerance” approach to immigration enforcement is only the latest step in a system that has been broken for decades. Despite our nation’s need for immigrant labor – it could fairly be called an addiction – we do not have the political will to protect immigrants’ human rights, to provide protection in the workplace, to provide a pathway to legal residency, to allow the people who are picking our produce, building our businesses and homes, caring for our children, tending our yards, processing our poultry, and doing the difficult work that many Americans will not do and do not envision their children doing – we don’t allow these decent and hardworking people to participate in society. They live in fear of deportation, in fear of raids, in the fear that going to work on any given day they might be rounded-up

and their kids may come home to any empty house with no knowledge of where their parents were taken – as happened in two large-scale raids in northern Ohio in the same time period when our attention was focused on the southern border.

Even the young who had no say about being brought to this country, who have only known this country as their homeland, who speak only English, who attend our schools, who work, and who strive for a share in the American dream – who have taken the risk of registering with the government trusting in the promise that they would be protected – now live in fear because we do not have the political will to do what a solid majority of the country supports, and protect the dreamers – who know the original American dream much better than many of us, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of yesterday's immigrants.

Now we must say as a nation that the incarceration of families is still the incarceration of children. We must say that there is a way to protect our borders from criminals – but it won't be found if we spend all of our time and resources prosecuting thousands of families escaping violence in their homelands. We must say that we too were once aliens in a foreign land and so we will heed the biblical admonition to “love the alien as yourself.” I hope that his fellow Methodists have shown Jeff Sessions those verses, found throughout the Old Testament!

For the first fifteen years of my priesthood, I lived and worked on the US-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas. I was the pastor of a church that was established in 1680 and, because of the change of the course of the Rio Grande, has been on both sides and even in the middle of that river. I learned to be a pastor from the people on the border, where the consequences of global injustice were right in front of our eyes. People standing on one side of the trickle known as the *Rio Bravo* could look across and see where their daily wage was being paid as an hourly wage. I saw the construction of fences and walls along the border, and simultaneously the mixed message coming from opportunities for employment alluring those seeking a better life. When Ciudad Juarez became one of the most dangerous places on earth, especially for women, the attraction of safety on the other side became even stronger. The growing militarization of the border came with increased violence, too often costing the lives of young people mistaken for criminals.

Yet even in those days, the US had a broken immigration system. A city whose history was bi-national and multi-cultural, where passing across the international boundary was a daily reality for many, became a divided city that re-enforced inequality. People from the north could freely go south, people from the south were detained when

attempting to come north. NAFTA was introduced allowing goods to pass freely across the border, but not the people that make and consume those goods.

The cry of the bishops on both sides of the border, then and now, was that we need comprehensive immigration reform: providing economic opportunities and safety in the homelands of migrants is the only lasting solution to the “problem” of immigration; people’s right to life, to survival and to the support of their families is of a higher moral order than the nation’s rights to protect its borders (although border protection is indeed a right of nations); people who cross borders do not give up their human rights and must be treated humanely; and immigration policies and quotas need frequent revision to make it possible for those who have a genuine need to migrate to do so legally and safely. It has been our consistent cry that people of faith must heed the biblical admonition to “welcome the stranger” and to respond to people in need in ways that respect their dignity.

At a recent ecumenical prayer service at a church in the capitol city of Kentucky, we reflected together on the Final Judgment scene from Matthew’s Gospel. I am afraid that in our individualized existence, we in the US fail to hear that in the opening lines of this judgment scene Christ arrives, throned in glory, to judge the *nations*. It is the nations that are divided like sheep from goats depending on their treatment of Christ present in the most needy. I offered the following application:

When we proclaim this gospel passage, we are committing ourselves to see Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, the brown and the black. And we are here to affirm the presence of Jesus in the outcast and exploited whose humanity has been disrespected and whose rights have been trampled. But we also need to listen very carefully to the voice of Jesus who says:

“When I picked and prepared your food, you watched me be handcuffed and loaded into a van.”

“When I grew the plants you will use in your yard, you allowed me to be detained far from where I lived and worked.”

“When I served you at table, you didn’t know that I went home in fear that I might be stopped along the way or that my spouse wouldn’t come home at all.”

“When I ran away from an abusive spouse, or protected my kids from gangs on our street, you turned me away from your border.”

“When I was five years old and separated from my parents, you accused me of being MS-13 or an actor.”

“When I sat next to you in class, you said ‘go back where you came from’ and insulted my accent, my skin color, my way of being.”

“When I was a child and woke up crying for my mom, you didn’t comfort me, much less help me find her.”

“When I came to do the work you advertised, you categorized me with rapists and drug dealers.”

“When I tried to call my precious child, you connected me to a bureaucracy with no answers.”

The Son of Man, coming in glory and surrounded by angels, is seated upon his glorious throne – but that throne is a thin mattress in a tent surrounded by a chain link fence.