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FR. LYDIO F. TOMASI, CS, ANNUAL LECTURE ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Border Spirituality: ‘*Tu eres mi otro yo*’
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Established in 2014, the Fr. Lydio F. Tomasi, C.S. Annual Lecture on International Migration addresses a migration-related topic of pressing concern to faith communities. Fr. Tomasi, a founding member of the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS), directed the institute from 1968 to 2001. Past lectures have been delivered by: Dr. Hosffman Ospino, Associate Professor of Hispanic Ministry and Religious Education at Boston College; Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, Distinguished Scholar of Theology and Latino Studies at Loyola Marymount University; and Dr. Maria Clara Bingemer, Professor of Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC) and Brazilian Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Democracy and Human Development in the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Co-sponsored with the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, the 2019 Fr. Lydio F. Tomasi, C.S. Annual Lecture on International Migration was delivered by **Msgr. Arturo J. Bañuelas, S.T.D.**, Pastor of St. Mark's Parish in El Paso, Texas. After earning his doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome, Msgr. Bañuelas was the founding director of the Tepeyac Institute, one of the largest diocesan ministry formation centers, training laity for parish ministry. The institute is distinctive in its formation, which is shaped by the reality of the border. Msgr. Bañuelas has been widely recognized and honored for his advocacy on behalf of farmworkers, immigrants and for his work on issues of life and justice at the border. He is a popular speaker and teacher who addresses topics of theology, faith and politics with various civic, academic, religious, pastoral and health organizations. Msgr. Bañuelas has founded a number of initiatives in theology, ministry and border activism over the past forty years. He was a co-founder of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS) and most recently established the Hope Border Institute, which focuses on justice issues in the three border dioceses of El Paso, Texas, Las Cruces, New Mexico and Juarez, Mexico. He also currently serves on the board of directors for the Border Network for Human Rights.

On February 17, 2016, Pope Francis visited our border area bringing a message of solidarity and justice for immigrants. On February 11, 2019, President Trump visited our border city bringing a message of division and xenophobia.

The Pope's message was filled with gospel truths. The president's message was filled with distorted lies about immigrants and our border. Pope Francis called us to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate immigrants. The president wanted separation of families, deportations, return of asylum seekers, elimination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and to build more of the border wall.

Our Holy Father offered hope for humanity in our compassion and solidarity with refugees. The president offered more fear to justify his obsession with a border wall – a monument to hate and a counter sign to the reign of God.

These two conflicting visions of America and Christian values play out every day in our ministry all along the US-Mexico border with significant consequences for human mobility and for our work.

THE BORDER

My home along the US-Mexico border looks like a battleground. Six thousand troops are lining the border walls with concertina razor sharp wire, and border agents are performing military style exercises in full riot gear. The government's anti-immigrant narrative continues to scare, anger, and stir people to hate newcomers and to promote harsher enforcement policies which separate families, close the door for immigrants who wish to provide for their families, increase the size and scope of the existing border wall, deny DACA students a place in our society, and detain youth in cages. All of this is morally wrong, deeply inhumane, fundamentally un-American, and un-Christian.

Those of us who live on the border can see that there is no national security threat here. This is one of the safest areas in the country. At the border, migrants are fingerprinted, and their data is run through Interpol, CBP, ICE, and FBI databases. Government checkpoints encircle our cities. Migrants are not criminals, and there is no invasion; they are basically good and decent people who want to provide a better future for their families. Projecting fear for political purposes dehumanizes, demonizes, and desensitizes us to the sufferings of others.

There are over 16,605 agents along our border. The cruel enforcement policies and the military presence foster a narrative of immigrants as the enemy and give the perception of rampant lawlessness and crime on our border – therefore justifying the need for the militarization of the border. This is a political stunt by the White House.

Today the Trump Administration is returning asylum seekers to Mexico to wait their turn for an appointment with immigration officials. This unjust policy is creating migrant camps in Ciudad Juárez, which is not prepared to handle the influx.

NEW VISION NEW VOICES

In spite of the government's anti-immigrant policies, something new and exciting is emerging from the border that gives meaning to our work and offers us a theological focus. A new God talk and a new God walk are being articulated by the new voices of the suffering immigrants seeking a more dignified life. They are the catechists and theologians of this emerging way to talk about God, the self, the other, and creation. The plight of the struggling immigrants is the privileged place for the manifestation of the unfolding plans of God for the coming reign of justice and peace in our world. Their voices are fashioning a new humanity.

Here are some of those voices, many of which we heard in our parish hall when it was a refugee shelter. Reina arrived from Guatemala, the country with the highest hunger rate in Central America. During the civil war, her parents, brothers, and sisters were killed; and she still carries those excruciating wounds. To survive, she works for about \$1.40 a day in the fields, which is not enough to feed her four children. Every 15 days, if possible, she buys a chicken to eat. This month with great desperation, she mortgaged her house and land so that she could come to the United States. If she does not repay this loan, she will lose her land and house. She arrived with one of her little daughters at one of our shelters with nothing but the pain of family separation and the hope of finding work to support her starving children. "I was forced to come to survive," she said.

At a parish vigil in support of families whose children were inhumanely and cruelly separated from their parents and placed in undisclosed locations, we heard the agony of a young mother tell her heartbreaking story. Julia's 6-month-old baby boy was brutally and forcefully removed from her arms, and she did not know where her baby was for 8 months. Imagine the torture she endured being separated and not knowing how or where her baby was. She prayed desperately that her baby would be well and returned to her soon. Finally, when the baby boy was returned, he suffered traumatic behaviors.

Children in particular are paying the price for these ill-conceived policies and practices. This past December, two Guatemalan children died while in the custody of the Border Patrol. [Jakelin Ameri Romery Caal Maquin](#) was 7-years-old, and [Felipe Gomez Alonzo](#) was 8-years-old. Their situations are still under investigation. Jaklin died because of neglect by a culture of cruelty toward those "criminal illegals," a term that includes even children. The anti-immigrant media immediately blamed the father for bringing Jaklin to the border some 2,000 miles from her home. Yet Jaklin was her father's favorite and was with him all the time.

I was blessed to be with Jaklin's father Nely at the funeral home where we prayed, cried, and commended Jaklin to the Lord. I asked Nely if he wanted to return to Guatemala to bury his daughter so that we could help him make the arrangements. He said, "Yes, I would like to bury my daughter, but, if I return, my other children will not have anything to eat."

I visited with both Jaklin and Felipe's families in Guatemala in hopes of offering some consolation to the suffering mothers and their brother and sisters. The mothers told me that both children were healthy and even happy to go with their fathers. Felipe, being the oldest of the boys, promised his mother that he would send her money to take care of her. We told the mothers that Jaklin and Felipe had inspired us to a greater solidarity with them, and that the death of their children

recommitted us to work for the human rights of refugees, especially for children. Our little martyrs live on in our work for justice.

Susana, a young Salvadoran woman, made the dangerous, two-month journey to our border, eating out of garbage cans, sleeping in parks, and begging for food on street corners. She was assaulted by cartels, which is why she arrived pregnant. I asked her why she did not return home after so much suffering. She confidently said, “I will suffer whatever I have to because I know God has a better plan for my baby.” We baptized her baby girl who she named Esperanza, “Hope.”

Julio, a 12-year-old boy from Honduras came fleeing rampant gang violence in his village. “En mi país la vida no vale nada,” he said, “Por 10 dólares de matan.” (“In my country, life is not worth anything. You get killed for 10 dollars.”) Thugs entered his house and killed his father, mother, and brother. He knew they would come for him next, so he ran away with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. He arrived at our shelter with no shoes and very hungry. He had not eaten anything in three days. He never had time to bury his family, and he carried that affliction with him. No child should have to experience such deep trauma.

Last week at breakfast, I asked a young Honduran father why he brought his little 9-year girl along with him on the treacherous journey to the United States. He said, “I take full responsibility for bringing my little girl,” and then said, “O vivimos o nos morimos, I had to risk it because we either die or we live, and I took the risk so that my family could live.”

These are important voices crying out through their sufferings for a new way to talk credibly about God and credibly live out a vision of justice in the world.

FORCED MIGRATION

Human rights violations in the countries of origin are the cause of forced migration. It is essential that the human rights of immigrants are protected upon their arrival at our border, and it is also imperative that we focus on human rights violations as a cause and not just a consequence of migration. We visited Guatemala last month and witnessed what is emblematic of all Central America: that is, life-threatening poverty; extreme hunger; lack of school teachers; scarcity of health care; relentless death threats; dreadful non-stop violence; victimization by organized crime; inadequate one room dirt floor houses for eight persons; displacement from land by corporations like the African Palm industry; shameful government corruption; servitude with undignified low wages and long working hours; repression; and painful trauma as the result of civil war. Basic human rights are not afforded the poor, so they are forced to leave simply to survive.

SOLIDARITY: *TU ERES MI OTRO YO*

For us, people of faith, the plight of immigrants is the point of departure for the manifestation and unfolding salvation plans of God among us today. The struggling immigrants, seeking a new life beyond their sufferings, call us to a special encounter of solidarity that goes beyond empathy and charity.

My indigenous ancestors, in their wisdom, teach us the meaning of this encounter of solidarity. They say: *Tu eres mi otro yo* – you are my other self. We are all intimately interrelated, interdependent, and essentially a sacred part of each other. *Tu eres mi otro yo* binds us so closely together so that, if I hurt you, I hurt myself. If I am part of your light shining, mine shines all the brighter.

Minutes from my house, you can drive along the US-Mexico border, and you can see an 18-foot high border wall – a racially motivated, politically charged symbol of hate, fear, division, and death. Each year more than four hundred immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers die in the desert trying to cross our border. I have had too many funerals. This horrible wall clearly says: We do not want to be part of you or you part of us. *Rechazo que tu seas mi otro yo* (“I reject that you are my other “me””).

Support for this divisive wall comes first from our own inner walls, which exist in our lifestyles, short-sighted biases, and the attitudes expressed in our anti-immigrant sentiments (they are rapists and criminals), racist propaganda against people different from us (we are superior to people of color), exclusion of LGBTQ persons (how can that be normal love), support of the Muslim ban (they are all terrorists), indifference toward the poor (they just need to get a job), carelessness towards our common home and sacred earth (climate change is a hoax), harassment and exploitation of women in the workplace (why should they earn as much as men or work outside the house), opposition to reasonable dialogue on gun control (guns don’t kill people, people do), the disproportionate incarceration of people of color (that’s where the crime is), the worship of individualistic egos (I have to take care of me first), and the growing gap between the rich and the poor (a rising tide will lift all boats). The walls between us threaten our sacred bonds.

The prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Luke proclaim the mission of the Messiah: “I have been anointed,” says Jesus, “to bring you the Good News” incarnate: *Tu eres mi otro yo*. This is an incarnational encounter of solidarity. When we are in solidarity with each other, we open ourselves to this anointing, and our oneness is made sacred – oneness with each other is oneness with God. Jesus teaches us that the first step in living profoundly this sacred solidarity is taking our place alongside the suffering poor who daily struggle to survive. Remember, there is no conversion to God if there is no conversion to the poor (Ignacio Ellacuría). Through their eyes, we see what Jesus sees – a life rich in beauty, value, and meaning. Solidarity means that the poor immigrants are not just a group of people. They are Juan, María, Susan, and Diego. They need to eat at our table, and we eat at their table. If we do not personally know a poor person, we are missing the opportunity to meet Jesus among us.

This is why our encounter of solidarity is more than charity and empathy. Many help immigrants, serve them at shelters, cook food for them, legally advocate for them, and even give them money for their trip home. When they finish their service, they return home the same as before and simply offer an empathetic response: “I am more grateful now to God for what I have that others do not.” This is not solidarity because for those persons the immigrants remain “those people we help.” It is not *tu eres mi otro yo*.

Real solidarity takes us out of our comfort zones into the actual sufferings and hopes of the immigrants. When we make our own their plight, their struggles, their dreams, we go to a sacred

place in our hearts where we begin to ask the deeper questions like, “What does my life style have to do with their suffering?” and this becomes transformative for us. A real encounter of solidarity is mutual and, in this mutuality, we become a part of each other’s life, we learn from each other, and we both become more. This is *tu eres mi otro yo* in its truest sense. Sometimes, for example, we help immigrants as clients at our offices; but do not share our dinner table with them as friends.

Tu eres mi otro yo is our banner of global solidarity. It is an act of non-violent resistance, because to remain silent is to give voice to hate and fear. Our lives shrivel when we remain silent in the face of the suffering of others. We are in the *lucha* not as neutral bystanders but as artisans of a new humanity and a new history.

Tu eres mi otro yo is an act of love that becomes public action on behalf of the common good of all, especially the poor. Political solidarity is the face of love, and our advocacy becomes an act of rebellion in favor of human rights and human dignity.

Tu eres mi otro yo is a spiritual invitation to embrace our differences as gifts that enrich our lives, make us better, fuller, more valued human beings. It is a prayer that draws us into the awesome mystery of divine life among us, where we allow ourselves to be enraptured by the *Misterium Tremendum et Facinans* and thus able to see the human face of Christ in the suffering poor.

It is, as Pope Francis says, a lifestyle of holiness and social justice. This encounter of solidarity is what transforms us into prophets, missionaries, and mystics of a vibrant and credible gospel. It is a lived and courageous hope, not afraid to take a stand for justice, knowing that each stand removes a brick from the wall of injustice, until it all comes tumbling down, until divisions are erased; and we are united as a global human communion, *una familia unida* (a united family). All of this becomes an anticipatory celebration, an eschatological fiesta to celebrate the possibilities of real love and new life.

An encounter of solidarity with refugees is our response to Jesus’s question, “Can you drink of the cup that I will drink? (Matthew 20:22) Can you drink of the cup filled with blood, human rights violations, racism, sufferings, the pains of hungry children, families being separated awaiting asylum in cold wire cages, and demonized persons considered non-human? In solidarity, we drink of this cup because it is a drink that leads to resurrected new life, and then we will see in the immigrants the faces of Easter and the promises of hope.

Jesus Christ, the migrant messiah, reveals to us that God has chosen to meet us and to save humanity through the poor, the marginalized, and the rejected of our sacred planet. We need to go through the poor to enter God’s plans of salvation, his justice, and peace.

There is an innate part of God in each of us that needs to be honored and respected always. When we listen with our hearts and share in solidarity with the sufferings, struggles, hopes, and dreams of the poor, our lives are shaped anew, our ministry finds its deepest meaning, our passion for living explodes into shouts of joy, and a new person and new humanity are born.

Tu eres mi otro yo grounds the quest of the poor person for self-realization in history. This is a struggle not just for justice but also for a new way to be human with just and improved economic, cultural, political, educational, and psychological conditions for them and their families.

All human freedoms, human rights, human dignity, social justice, peace, advocacy, and reconciliation efforts are grounded first on *tu eres mi otro yo*, the solidarity of our sacred oneness.

In our encounters of solidarity with the refugees, we can see beyond what is going on in the world and see what is coming, what God's grace is doing in the world. We can see God at work bringing his plans to fulfillment. We see justice on the march, peace coming, and we commit ourselves to this movement of grace in history.

Sometimes at immigration conferences, I hear discussions of migrant fatigue wondering if things are ever going to get better. *¡Claro que si!* Of course, they are! Because we have a profound conviction in the victory of Christ over injustices. The future is filled with God's blessings, so we celebrate life and anticipate joys beyond the problems. We are not people of doom and gloom but prophets, missionaries, and mystics of God's plans. We live with profound hope that in all things Jesus wins. We are not blind to evil, but believe with Saint Paul, "where there is sin, all the more grace abounds" (Romans 5:20). For us, hope means that racism, walls, and fear will not determine the future of God's plans, and so we never give up. We keep on fighting with hope.

I also want to mention that our gathering here and our work in solidarity with immigrants is about a bigger movement than just immigration. Again, you are very familiar with the main issues, the data and policies needed to address them. The struggling refugees are challenging:

- White supremacy, xenophobia, intolerance, and racism (fear destroys us, embracing differences enriches us);
- Economic models of greed of the MarketWorld with their progressive win-win programs masquerading as development for the poor (if you buy one pair of shoes, someone in a poor country also gets a pair of shoes – this is socialism for the rich because the poor remain poor and the rich get richer);
- Our politics (nativism and corruption are an attack on global democracy because it excludes the human rights of the poorest);
- Our religion (the Bible teaches that we are made in the image of God, but we have turned God into our own self-centered image to justify our individualism and indifference toward the poor, the disposable in our world); and
- Our values (who are we as a nation that professes the promise of life, liberty, and justice for all?).

With your significant work grounded on *tu eres mi otro yo*, you are challenging the status quo to fashion a new humanity filled with God's justice, human rights, peace, and love. Your vital work is part of an historical fight, a global movement of justice empowering the poor refugees to finesse if not redefine who we are as a nation and what vision we will follow.

BORDER ISSUES

At one of the shelters, a young boy, Diego from El Salvador, who had been beaten on his journey, was now ready to get on the bus and go to Tennessee. Before leaving he gave me a big hug and said, *gracias por mi futuro* – thanks for my future. Diego was thanking all of us. The struggling refugees at the border are giving us a full plate. We are addressing the reunification of families, infants as young as 5 months old are being detained in ICE cages. Coyotes have a lucrative business with their *tráfico de personas humana* (trafficking of people).

I am concerned about a negative narrative of immigrants that portrays them as criminals and neglects to value their contributions. For example, they pay more in taxes than they receive in services or retirement benefits. Others complain that immigrants do not assimilate, yet say nothing about those who still fly the confederate flag. The reality is that unauthorized immigration is at near a 20-year low, and the majority of newly unauthorized immigrants have overstayed their temporary visas.

Much work needs to be done to challenge government policies toward Central America that turns a blind eye to the poor, to drug smugglers, and the *trabajo sucio* (dirty work) of organ sellers.

We have all studied solutions to this immense refugee situation. Again, you all know the stories, you know the data, you know the continued violations of human rights that our immigrant brothers and sisters suffer. Our solutions are many but need to include:

- Advocating for legal status;
- Proposing laws that protect our sacred earth;
- Comprehensive immigration reform;
- Safe entry for asylum seekers and refugees;
- Legalization of undocumented parents of US citizens;
- Reallocation of ICE funding;
- Prioritizing family reunification;
- Just foreign and economic policies;
- Addressing the demand for drugs on this side of the border;
- Stopping the coyote business;
- Responding to pro-government evangelicals;
- Outside supervision of detention centers;
- Admission and atonement for more than two centuries of interference in hemispheric internal politics, and;
- Confronting racism that fuels the anti-immigrant sentiment.

WE WILL WIN

To conclude, I want to thank you for helping us who minister along the border and for your dedication to promoting solidarity, human rights, and human dignity. I have been personally inspired by your work in service to the poorest among us.

I pray that this day be a renewed commitment to live faithfully your sacred calling to live in the solidarity of our sacred oneness in God and each other. Fr. James Martin, SJ has a biblical prayer for us: “Jesus never said, feed the hungry only if they have papers. Clothe the naked only if they are from your country. Welcome the stranger only if there’s zero risk. Help the poor only if it’s convenient. Love your neighbor only if they look like you.” This is how we build a vision and a world *sin fronteras opresivas y con puentes de esperanza* (without oppressive borders and with bridges of hope).

The White House may be spreading falsehoods of doom because of the immigrants’ presence in our country, but we are actually living a *Kairos* moment; and we already have some victories we can celebrate:

- DACA students are among the nation’s highest achievers and innovators in math and science.
- Thirty-three Nobel peace prize recipients are immigrants.
- Today we have the greatest movements in support of immigrants than at any time in our history. The majority of US residents now favor immigration reform.
- More people in the United States have heard of Matthew 25: “I was a foreigner and you welcomed me.”
- Last month we had a first real congressional visit to a border detention center calling for investigation of the deaths of migrant children.
- The Pope and bishops from the Americas are making immigrant care a priority.
- The poor, struggling immigrants keep the president awake at night.
- The poor are shaping the cultural landscape of our communities with new friendships, new foods, religious family values, and cultural celebrations.

There are so many others. Roberto, for example, went through our parish citizenship program until he became a US citizen. His native-born son now owns a restaurant where he works. He expresses his happiness and his tremendous gratitude by helping other migrants, taking food to the shelters, taking migrants to the bus station, buying them bus tickets and food bags for the trip. Roberto wants to do this until he dies. He told me, “Thank you, and thank all the wonderful people who have helped me come to this special moment in my life.” He said, “We were starving in my country. Please tell everyone, father, for people not to be afraid of us. We are not a burden. We are a blessing.” I said, “Yes, you are not a burden but a privilege.”

Fr. Dan Berrigan was once asked: “What do you want written on your tombstone?” He said, “May he never rest in peace!” That is all of us here. We will not rest until justice for immigrants reigns in our land.

Let *tu eres mi otro yo* continue to fashion a vision of your work and ministry. Tonight challenges us to build communities of hope in which people are not afraid of each other, in which they become welcoming communities that embrace differences as blessings. Tonight challenges us to a greater resistance that will not allow racism to become normal, where we can engage people to make a bigger table, not a taller wall, and where suffering humanity can aspire not so much to the American dream but to the kingdom dream.

Victory is ours tonight. I feel totally confident that on immigration reform we will win. We will win! Hope runs through our veins, and the cause of reform endures in our hearts. To those who stand in the way of our work on immigration reform, we remind you that history is on the side of justice.

We will win. We have marched too many miles, fought too many battles, shed too much blood, taken too many hits, cried too many tears; but this has made us stronger and more passionate to do whatever it takes. We are ready to take our banner to the White House, to Congress, to the restaurants, to the homes in every part of our country because this is how we prepare for our victory celebration that is coming soon. With the Psalmist, I believe that “we will see the greatness of the Lord in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13).

I feel honored to share in this journey with you tonight. I am happy and proud to say to you: “*Tu eres mi oto yo.*” *Dios los bendiga. Gracias.*