



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 28, Number 3

Summer 2019

US Policy at the Intersection of Immigration and Racism

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EXPERIENCE

After the 2016 presidential elections, I gathered in the church cafeteria with Guatemalan parishioners alarmed by escalating anti-immigrant rhetoric. We prayed and then opened a space where people could share freely. Angelica, a middle-aged indigenous woman who leads the team of Eucharistic ministers, stood up. Angelica's father had been killed by gangs in Guatemala several years ago, and her stepson was apprehended by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) the previous month. Still, I'd never seen her courage wilt. "I need to tell you what happened to me," Angelica began, voice quivering. "Last week, I was shopping at Kroger, minding my own business, when a man I don't know approached me. 'Haha!' he laughed. 'Trump won! Now you have to go back to your country!'" Tears puddled in Angelica's usually sparkling eyes. She has been here for twenty years.

Fast forward to June 2019. I visited the Somali refugee family that lived at our motherhouse upon arrival to the United States. My heart swelled with pride as the kids told me about school and mom about the store her husband is opening. Nasra, a teenager, showed me a speech she wrote about following your dreams. "You are amazing," I told her, taking her hand and visibly choking up. "I know it hasn't been easy." She flashed a brilliant smile and then pursed her lips. "Yeah, there are challenges," she sighed. "Last week, I was studying on the porch when a car slowed down. A guy yelled out the window, 'Go back to your country!' and then sped off." Ironically, after escaping Somalia where her grandfather was killed and baby sister died from malnutrition, Nasra's family lived in a refugee camp for nine years - with no country at all.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

What must one do to truly belong in the United States and claim it as "their country?" Frankly, it seems, they must be white. This sentiment has

long been pervasive in both public attitudes and policy. [Dr. Grainne McEvoy](#), expert on US immigration history and Catholic social thought, says, "US immigration law has been intentionally crafted since the 1880s to keep the population looking a certain way." Initially, the fledgling United States beckoned migrants to its shores. But in the midst of a late-19th century depression, white immigrants and citizens began to scapegoat Chinese immigrants and citizens, many of whom built the railroad system. The result was the first US federal law restricting immigration on the basis of nationality: The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Resolutions to Action is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Gemma Doll, OP; Susan Dunning, CSJ; Susan Francois, CSJP; Donna Marie Gribshaw, CDP; Eileen Haynes, SCL; Patricia Siemen, OP; and Ann Scholz, SSND, staff. Please address correspondence to:

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Four decades later, in response to increased immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, the Immigration Act of 1924 capped annual immigration and [set quotas based on national origins](#). Northwest European and Scandinavian countries were allotted 86% of the yearly total, a direct effort to promote and preserve white Anglo-American dominance. Ultimately, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act abolished the quota system in favor of family connections and skills, but it introduced limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. For generations, Mexicans had migrated across the southern border permanently or seasonally, usually facilitated by the US government and employers. The 1965 act made many of these customary migratory practices “illegal.” Hispanics have been targets of suspicion and criminalization ever since, even as the US economy depends on their labor.

Racism and immigration continue to intersect today. Because people of color in the United States are more likely to be stopped by police and arrested, immigrants of color are more vulnerable to incarceration and deportation. In some cities, police departments partner with ICE to ramp up enforcement. Immigrants and refugees of color like Angelica and Nasra are subject to discrimination, hate, violence, and structural barriers that tell them they don’t belong. The current administration is particularly vitriolic and inhumane, employing tactics that tyrannized the Chinese 150 years ago: vilification, ridiculing, scapegoating, dividing families, targeting non-criminals, prohibiting entry for certain nationalities, detaining human beings in camps, and seeking

to revoke birthright citizenship. Interestingly, way back in the 1890s, [Chinese-American Wong Kim Ark](#) won a Supreme Court case that upheld birthright citizenship. The justices recognized that to deny Wong’s citizenship would violate the 14th Amendment and require rescinding the citizenship of Anglo-Americans, too. Far from native, Northern Europeans were the colonizers who brutally subdued the indigenous peoples and stole their land – a fact often downplayed by the willful amnesia of mainstream US history.

REFLECTION

The USCCB maintains two [immigration criteria](#) in tension: people have the right to migrate, and countries have the right to regulate their borders. However, the bishops emphasize that countries with greater means must accept greater responsibility. Regulation of borders must be done with justice and mercy, focused on the common good, and with compassion for the suffering. Scripture tells us that when we welcome the “stranger,” we welcome Christ (Mt 25:35). As such, no one is really a stranger. We are one body. All people are made in the image of God, deserving of equal rights. Immigration policies based on excluding people of certain ethnicities are not Christian and neither is subtly and overtly upholding “whiteness” as the ideal American culture.

This is particularly challenging to white US Catholics who have long benefitted from being the dominant, normative group. Whether we’re cognizant of it or not, we may be quick to claim our country, our parishes, and even our

religious congregations as exactly that – ours – expecting others to assimilate without relinquishing our control. We know that our faith calls us to courageous outward action for justice. At the same time, we must look inside ourselves and our circles at how centuries-old racist, nativist sentiment still creeps into our consciousness and ways of operating. Just as Jesus’ limited vision was widened by a clever Syrophenician woman (Mt 15:21-28), are we willing to see things anew and act accordingly?

- Continue to educate yourself about lesser-known US history, including US involvement in Latin America and post-Jim Crow systemic racism.

ACTION

- Engage in anti-racism training as a congregation. Examine personal and group biases. Discern what needs to change to more authentically welcome members not of the dominant culture.
- Support activism efforts led by those most affected by the injustice, for example [United We Dream](#) led by a national network of immigrant youth.
- Subscribe to updates from [Justice for Immigrants](#) and the [Catholic Legal Immigration Network](#) to stay up-to-date on immigration happenings, action alerts, and church responses. Raise your voice against racist, inhumane policies and for comprehensive reform.
- Donate to organizations caring for asylum seekers at the southern border: [Annunciation House](#), [Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley](#), and [Kino Border Initiative](#) are a few possibilities.