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Welcoming the Stranger Among Us

Last year at its November meeting, the US Catholic Bishops issued an excellent statement on the Church's ministry to immigrants and refugees. While both groups come to us from foreign lands, there is a difference between the two. Immigrants migrate to our country, perhaps, to be reunited with family members, or to seek new opportunities or greater freedom. Refugees, on the other hand, come here fleeing from oppression of one kind or another.

Our diocese is richly blessed in having a highly respected Office of Refugees and Immigration Services with three offices in Richmond, Norfolk and Roanoke. We have experienced first hand the beauty and talent of those who are culturally different – people from Vietnam, Korea, Hispanics from twenty-four different countries, people from the Philippines, Haitians, Sudanese, Bosnians, eastern Europeans. All have become quickly self-sufficient, contributing to the communities in which they live and work. They have brought their particular cultures, each with its emphasis on family and with its unique ethnic giftedness. As they worship side by side with us, they enrich the quality of our community prayer. While retaining their own identity and spirituality, they have become one family with us.

In their statement on immigrants and refugees, the bishops emphasize the importance of unity in diversity. In observing National Migration Week last month, the bishops focus on Jesus who accepted and embraced the stranger. They emphasize that we, as followers of the same Jesus, must have a welcoming and accepting spirit. In our country, unfortunately, many treat immigrant people and undocumented aliens with disdain, prejudice and outright rejection. I often receive letters in which the writers depict newcomers as cheap labor, as those who increase welfare costs, as those who steal our jobs, as those who contribute little in way of taxes, and so forth.

In their statement, the bishops remind us that we are an immigrant Church. The Catholic Church in the United States is what it is because

of the countless numbers who came to these shores from Europe. They came with their faith and cultural traditions. They came to our country as the land of opportunity. Every wave of immigrants faced blatant prejudice whether it was the Irish in Boston, the Polish in cities of the Midwest, the Germans in rural areas, the French from Canada, the Italians in most cities, and Jewish people escaping the terror of the holocaust. The list of immigrants is endless, and we as a people are the sum total of those who came in hope for a better life for themselves and their children. Last summer, the bishops sponsored a large gathering of ethnic groups under the title, "Many Faces in God's House." That title says it all, and should influence our attitudes toward others who are different from ourselves.

In the past, just as now in the present, the Church responds generously to the needs of the immigrants by building parishes and schools, by establishing a vast array of charitable institutions, by evangelizing newcomers and being evangelized by them. I have seen how the welcoming spirit in parishes gave a new sense of mission to parishioners. Putting faith into practice gave people a new sense of purpose and meaning. Parishes, instead of becoming sacred enclaves, find that outreach ministry to the less fortunate, concern for the poor and victims of discrimination make the gospel come alive in their lives.

In a recent address, Pope John Paul II stated that "pastoral care of migrants" is a way to accomplish the mission of the Church today. He emphasizes that the proclamation of the gospel is directed toward the integral salvation of the human person. The gospel defines one's authentic and effective liberation in terms of achieving conditions of life that are suitable to human dignity. The Church has a mandate to uphold fundamental human rights and to speak up whenever they are restricted or trampled upon. For our Holy Father, the voice of experience during the Nazi days of terror, the Church must never grow tired (or selfish) in affirming and defending the dignity of the human person.

I am very committed to uphold, respect and support the cultural heritage of each ethnic group. The "melting pot" mentality is an affront to the inner spirit of an individual or ethnic group. Some people find differences threatening, or they assume that their particular culture is superior to that of another. We have so much of this world's goods, and we take so much for granted, that we cannot tolerate any inconvenience. We must recognize that our own American culture, with its emphasis on wealth, prosperity, privacy and freedom has led us to accept violence as a way of life, abortion as a way of getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy, the deterioration of family life as an acceptable way to solve problems. Yes, we have much to learn from and emulate

in others, others who come to us with a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude.

Yes, let us always be welcoming the stranger. I am glad that my Irish grandparents found a new life in our country and that my Dutch grandparents, along with my mother, were able to migrate to the country in which I was born and love. Just as they were welcomed by a Church who welcomed the stranger, so we must do likewise.

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