

In the Heartland

“I was a stranger (a/k/a refugee and immigrant) and you welcomed me.”

(Mt. 25:35)

Recently, I celebrated the Lunar New Year with St. Peter Vietnamese Catholic Community. We welcomed the year of the Rooster which highlights the values of courage and diligence.

Certainly something to “crow” about!

The occasion, as is so often the case when I gather with the Vietnamese, was an opportunity to remember and give thanks for the many of them being welcomed into the United States at the time of the fall of Saigon and the end of the war between Vietnam and the United States and thereafter. Under the leadership of Governor Robert Ray and Bishop Dingman and Rabbi Goldberg, Iowa played an instrumental role in organizing the placement of the Vietnamese refugees in Iowa. Our light shined brightly.

Like all of the nationalities and ethnic groups before (which we all belong to) the Vietnamese have enriched our life together. They hold to high principles, are family oriented and are remarkably hard workers. No contest, we would experience serious deprivation without their presence.

Today, we are facing another refugee and immigrant crisis as attempts are made to exclude some worthy representatives seeking to enter our country legally after a thorough vetting because of religion or country of origin.

There is no doubt in the broader picture that our immigration system is broken. But there is an orderly, constructive way to repair it. During his administration, President Reagan did so. Presidents Bush and Obama presented similar legislation which legislation fell victim to the political meat grinder.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has gone on record endorsing such legislation recognizing the Federal Government's responsibility to protect our borders and to provide for an orderly flow of refugees and immigrants to our country based on standards that have always been at the heart of our country. In addition, as was the case with President Reagan, a pathway to citizenship should be provided to those who are here for a long time without documents but who contribute to the economy and our way of life. From the Christian perspective, it is the compassionate and humane option.

As we explore the various possibilities for protecting the country's borders one proposal is that a wall be built the length of the U.S./Mexican border which cost is estimated in the tens of billions of dollars.

As we reflect upon walls, respected leaders' voices come to mind. In his 1987 exhortation to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Berlin as he stood before the "Iron Curtain" or Berlin Wall, President Reagan thundered: "Mr. Gorbachev take this wall down." Eventually, the wall came down and, those who had suffered in Eastern Europe experienced national freedom and release from the bonds of communism. These people became the friends of the U.S. and Europe.

Pope Francis has repeated consistently: “Christians build bridges, not walls.” In the current relationship with Mexico and Central America the flow of people originates in large measure because of root causes. They experience chronic violence, corruption, the collapse of the school system and most especially the drug trade which is at the heart of these problems. Those leaving these situations do so out of desperation. They are willing to risk their very lives for some relief.

As we contemplate the proposed wall, wouldn't the more effective and reasonable way to counter the flow of desperate refugees be to utilize the billions of dollars to address the root causes, the basic one being the insatiable appetite of Americans for drugs? In carefully cooperative efforts, conditions could be established to enable those caught in intolerable situations to stay at home where they want to be in the first place.

The movement of peoples and the enrichment of the United States by refugees and immigrants have been a constant part of each chapter of our country's rich history. Its ramifications are not only political in nature but have a solid relationship to our religious and moral traditions. Is not now the time to exercise these as we assert loyalty to that which defines us as Christians and also at the same time as loyal U.S. citizens?

The words of Jesus reverberate in our hearts: “I was a stranger, (a/k/a refugee and immigrant) and you welcomed me.” (Mt. 25:35)

The words of Pope Francis in his address to Congress in 2015 also guide us in his reference to scripture: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”