

In the Heartland

Richness in Diversity

My breath was taken away with the enthusiasm and huge crowd that greeted Father Reynaldo Hernandez as he celebrated his first Mass as the new parochial vicar at Nuestras Señora da las Americas (Our Lady of the Americas) on Palm Sunday. People were standing several rows deep outside the doors and excitement was tangible throughout the building.

Father Reynaldo, ordained a priest in October, 2009, in El Salvador provides an injection of Latino spirit and culture into the parish community. He connects easily because of his direct and simple spirituality. His heritage as an El Salvador native has dubbed him a “grandson of Archbishop Oscar Romero” who combined strong faith with a passion for the dignity of every person.

Like all their ethnic predecessors, the waves of Latino immigrants bring much richness to our midst. Their lively Catholic faith, their earned reputation for hard work, their commitment to family, their culture – food, music and dance are welcome additions to the American mosaic. They also are encouraged in the transition to their new home by connections such as Father Reynaldo brings.

In the course of the past year, a fresh Hispanic community has also begun at Queen of Apostles Parish in Council Bluffs. Extending a warm invitation, Father Dan Kirby has seen the weekly Hispanic community grow to between 350 to 400 attending weekly Mass. Primarily ministering the sacramental celebrations is Father Paul Koch from the Des Moines Diocese who retired after 40 years as a missionary in Bolivia. Similar to Father Reynaldo, he is highly appreciated because of his pastoral and language skills and the ability to relate to the culture.

In addition to the foregoing, the Diocese of Des Moines is reaching out to Latinos with sacramental services in Perry, Red Oak, Lenox, Osceola and Sacred Heart Parish in West Des Moines. We are grateful to our Diocesan priests who so admirably serve the newcomers in our midst.

The Latinos are not the only new arrivals that the Des Moines diocese is privileged to host. On my frequent visits to the Cathedral of St. Ambrose, St. John Basilica and St. Peter Vietnamese Catholic Community, I enjoy rich encounters with recent arrivals from Sudan, other African countries, Eritrea, Vietnam, Laos (Hmong).

Catholic Charities of Des Moines has done a remarkable service in being a lead agency in the resettlement of refugees and immigrants. One person who has been especially effective and who has dedicated her life to the refugees is Sister Pat Scherer of the Cathedral staff. Bishop Maurice Dingman insisted that Sister Pat stay in the diocese and

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engage this ministry. He most likely had the premonition that she would develop into Des Moines' version of Mother Theresa.

Iowans have much to be proud of insofar as under the leadership of Governor Bob Ray we Iowans were among the first to welcome the most recent wave of refugees and immigrants at the time of the collapse of South Vietnam. This admirable tradition has been carried forward by public and religious organizations in service to other ethnic groups. Catholic Charities continues to exercise a significant and leading role in this resettlement process in both a professional and humane manner.

The motivation for our outreach and service to the immigrant and refugee is central to our Catholic faith. This corporal work of mercy builds us the body of Christ for in reaching out and welcoming these newcomers, we serve Christ himself: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35).

To be generous and hospitable to the struggling and insecure of those arriving in our country is right and just, moreover, because every person possesses a human dignity that ought to be upheld and respected. We are, after all, part of one human family. We are children of one God. We are our brother's and sister's keeper.

It is because of the broad relationship that we share with the immigrants and refugees already so numerous in our midst and those who potentially might come that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is advocating comprehensive reform of our country's current immigration laws and system. Nearly every one recognizes the system is broken and needs to be fixed – so that justice, legal order, compassion and understanding longtime hallmarks of our country's framework will welcome the newcomers.

The U.S. Bishops in their landmark document "Strangers No Longer" no. 28, state:

"Catholic teaching has a long and rich tradition in defending the right to migrate. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, the Church's teaching has provided the basis for the development of basic principles regarding the right to migrate for those attempting to exercise their God-given human rights."

The following five principles laid out in "Strangers No Longer" provide points of reflection for us as Catholics as we think about the issues surrounding undocumented immigrants, migrants, refugees and other people on the move especially as Congress and the President take up consideration in this regard.

- I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homelands.
- II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- V. The human dignity and human rights of all migrants should be respected.

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The Pew Hispanic Forum estimates that about 12 million undocumented immigrants live and work in the United States including, obviously, the State of Iowa. The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to undercutting immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart. In keeping with the foregoing principles and in the interest of effective law, justice and realism the Bishops of the United States have been strong supporters of immigration reform. This support includes:

- A broad-based legalization (permanent residency) of the undocumented of all nationalities
- Reform of our family-based immigration system to allow family members to reunite with loved ones in the United States
- Reform of the employment-based immigration system to provide legal pathways to come and work in a safe, humane, and orderly manner
- Abandonment of the boarder "blockade" enforcement strategy
- Restoration of due process protections for immigrants. *

As Christians and those concerned with the orderly process of law in our country, I urge you to lend your support to Comprehensive Immigration Reform currently under consideration by our nation's lawmakers. In so doing, you will participate in the legacy of Governor Bob Ray which established Iowa as a leader in the modern tradition of welcoming and providing assistance to those in special need to our country. We will also be honoring the recent additions to our diocesan community who in their diversity add great richness to our life together.

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