

## ***Social Concerns Notes***

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### **The Catholic Church and Immigration**

by Peter Schaeffer

The Industrial Revolution, which began some 300 years ago in Great Britain and then spread to the European continent, the United States and Canada, and eventually, the rest of the world, changed the economic, social, and cultural landscape. One of its outcomes was unprecedented population redistribution from the countryside to cities, and of workers from farms and craft shops to factories, and later to offices and laboratories, as well.

The process of urbanization is far along in industrialized countries, but only half of the global population is urban. However, urban populations are expanding rapidly. Seven of the world's ten largest cities are in developing or emerging economies. The growth of these and other very large cities in developing countries is more due to dramatic internal rural-to-urban migrations that took place for economic and political reasons over the last several decades, than because of high natural growth rates.

In material terms, the world continues to become a better place. Over the last fifty years child mortality has decreased and life expectancy has increased. Average family size has decreased in most countries, and per capita income has increased. Unfortunately, in some instances, after wars of independence, civil wars or wars over border adjustments followed, which destroyed harvests and infrastructure, made investments uncertain and dangerous, delayed social and economic progress, and sometimes even reversed progress already made, and causing some 20 million displaced people and refugees world-wide.

The economic, social, and political changes experienced everywhere have led to large migration pressures from poor to more affluent countries, involving an estimated 200 million foreign migrants world-wide. Northern European countries have significant immigrant populations, some with percentages comparable to those of the United States. Also like the United States, the new immigration is increasingly coming from other cultures and continents. Europe's foreign-born population includes 4.43 million refugees who have been granted asylum (U.S. and Canada: 0.853 million). Changes occur quickly, and Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and Ireland, until recently emigrant nations, have become immigration destinations as their economies improved. Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries have been immigrant nations for decades. In Asia, Japan and Singapore are immigrant destinations. In the Middle East, Israel has non-Jewish guest workers, and oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are attracting immigrants from other Middle Eastern countries, Africa, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, Europe, and the United States. In Africa, too, strong economies attract people in search of a better life, and South Africa has thus become an immigration destination to other Africans.

The migration of large numbers of relatively unskilled workers can be viewed as an extension of the rural-to-urban migration that is fueling world-wide urbanization. The growth of international migration also reflects the increasing global connectedness of labor markets. This is particularly evident in the international competition for highly skilled immigrants, which entered a new phase when in the 1970s Canada started to give points for education and skills in granting immigrant visas. Several countries adjusted their visa policies in response. The United States offers an annual contingent of so-called H-1B visas for highly qualified foreign nationals. This visa entitles the holder to also bring the spouse and

children under 21, but they are not allowed to work. A visa holder may apply for a permanent visa (“green card”), something most other non-permanent visas do not permit.

Just like the immigration of the past thirty years has changed the makeup of the population of the United States, so it is likely that the next half century will see further changes in the composition of U.S. immigrants. For example, Mexico’s fertility rate has been dropping, and its economy has been improving. If this trend continues, then migration pressures from our southern neighbor should start to diminish and the influence of people coming from countries other than Mexico become larger, unless, of course, immigration becomes much smaller than it is today.

The Catholic bishops on several occasions have made their position on immigration known. In February 2003, the bishops of the United States and Mexico jointly released *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*, a pastoral statement that called for a comprehensive approach to immigration reform. At a conference held in 2006, Archbishop Gomez of San Antonio, TX, reminded the audience that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “the more prosperous nations have the duty to welcome, as much as possible, the foreigner who seeks security and a means of living that he is unable to find in his country of origin.”

The American Church is supportive of immigrants in part because of its history. In 1920, 75 percent of American Catholics were immigrants. Beyond history, its position reflects the view that the root cause of large scale migration “...is the unequal distribution of the gifts of creation and the structures that have arisen to protect those who have received the bounty of those gifts from those who covet the gifts that others have received” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, Committee on Migration, *One Family Under God*, 1995).

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have formulated basic principles on immigration, which include a commitment to asylum for those fleeing persecution, the right to live and work without being exploited, family reunification as a basis for a just immigration policy, efforts to encourage and enable highly skilled and educated individuals to return to their homelands, and efforts to stem migrations that do not effectively address their root causes, such as political, social, and economic inequities. Hence, while the bishops favor a generous immigration policy, they first and foremost wish that those with the power to do so would address the root causes so that fewer people would feel compelled to move.

The position of the American Catholic Church conflicts with several trends in the current immigration reform. First, the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ effort to encourage the return of skilled and educated individuals is incompatible with current efforts to attract highly skilled immigrants. Second, the bishops favor retaining the focus on family reunification. In his testimony to Congress in May 2007, Bishop Wenski, the former chairman of the U.S. Bishop’s Conference on Migration, stated that “From the church perspective, a family member from Central America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean or elsewhere could well offer the country as much as a computer software engineer,” he said. “We should not abandon family unity as the cornerstone of our immigration system.” “Pope John Paul II stated that there is a need to balance the rights of nations to control their borders with basic human rights, including the right to work,” Bishop Wenski testified. The church is also concerned that a temporary worker (guestworker) program could result in a class of workers with fewer rights who could be more prone to being exploited.

These are the major concerns expressed by church leaders. They believe that enforcement alone is insufficient to address the immigration problems, and that in some respects it makes them worse, as for example in the increased number of deaths from illegal border crossings. Immigration policy must respect human life. Reform must address causes and not just enforcement, so that eventually fewer people will come. This is the challenge we have to meet.