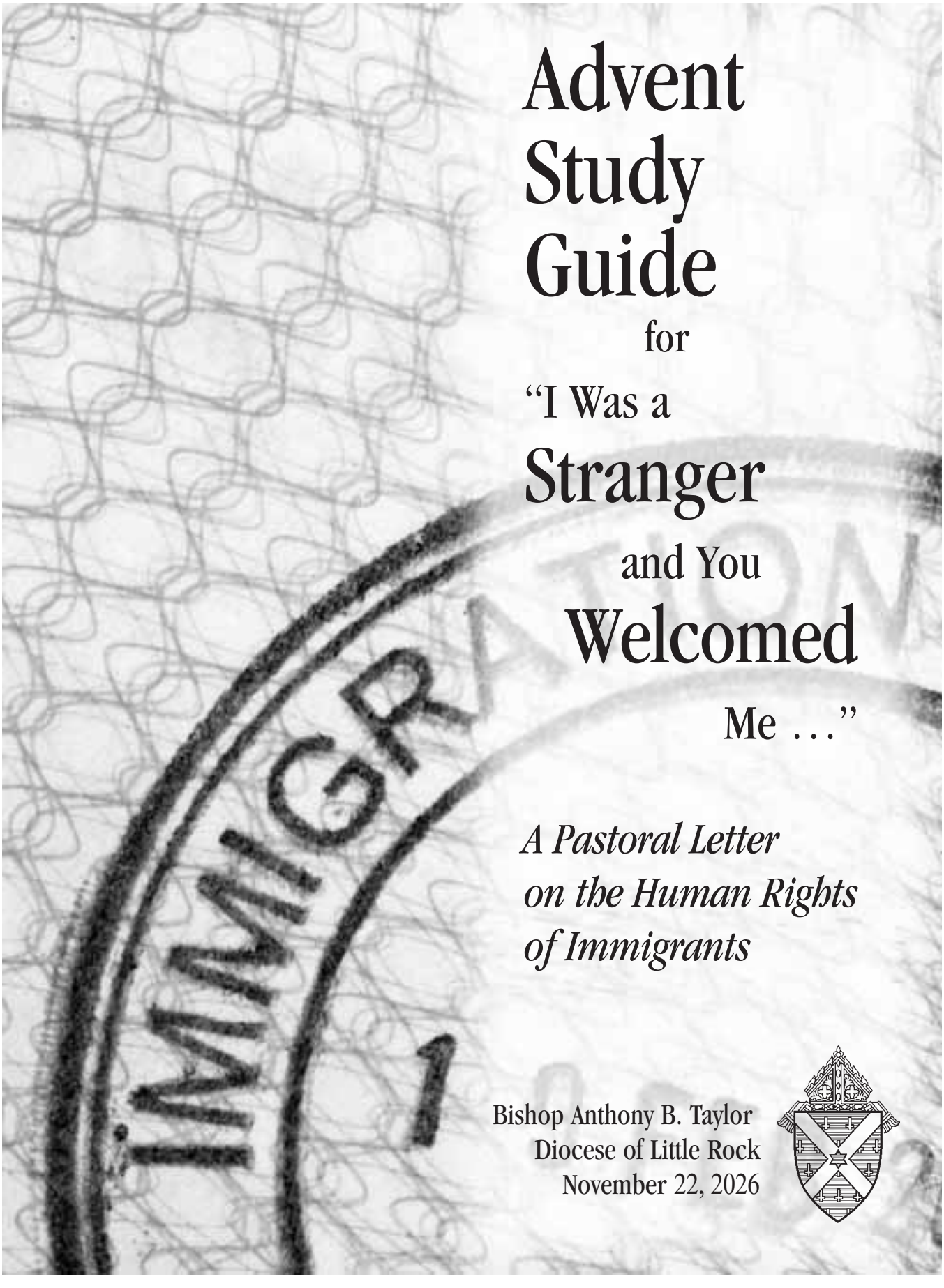


Advent Study Guide for "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me …"

A Pastoral Letter on the Human Rights of Immigrants

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor
Diocese of Little Rock
November 22, 2026

Table of Contents

Introduction . . . . . page 3

Session One: Group Sharing . . . . . page 4

Session One: Closing Prayer . . . . . page 5

Session Two: Group Sharing . . . . . page 6

Session Two: Closing Prayer . . . . . page 7

Session Three: Group Sharing. . . . . page 9

Session Three: Closing Prayer . . . . . page 11

Summary Outline of the Pastoral Letter "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me ..." . . . . . page 13

■

Copyright © 2026, Anthony B. Taylor. All rights reserved.
This document may be copied or redistributed with acknowledgement. No further permission is required; samples are appreciated.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.

■

Written by Catherine Upchurch, Director of Little Rock Scripture Study
Published by *Arkansas Catholic*
Printed in the United States of America

For additional copies, contact the
Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Little Rock
P.O. Box 7565
Little Rock, AR 72217-7565
(501) 664-0340
www.dolr.org

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me …
Advent Study Guide

The Season of Advent is the perfect time to reflect on the story of salvation and its culmination in the birth of Jesus. We take this time also to look at how salvation history continues to unfold in our lives, with its challenges and its hopes.

Just as Mary and Joseph journeyed from one region to another to protect their infant Son, God's people continue to move across the landscape of our continent in search of stability, protection and a better life.

In three sessions, we will explore "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me …: A Pastoral Letter on the Human Rights of Immigrants" issued in Advent 2008 and reissued in 2026 by Anthony B. Taylor, bishop of Little Rock. This is a document (referred to as *I Was a Stranger* in this study guide) that invites us to examine our faith tradition, our Church's social teaching and the realities of life in 21st century Arkansas.

Each week, parishioners are asked to meet in groups of 10-12 people to reflect on the teachings of this pastoral letter in light of Scripture and to pray together about what is being learned. Plan for your session to last about 90 minutes.

Tips for small group sharing:

- Designate a person to be each group's facilitator. This person may be someone who has facilitated other groups in the parish, such as Little Rock Scripture Study or Why Catholic?, or simply may be a volunteer from within the group.
- Facilitators are asked to guide the group through the questions designated for each session. State the question in the group. Invite volunteers to read the Scripture passage if one is noted. And then allow anyone in the group to contribute to the response before moving to the next question.
- Don't fear silence. Many people need a few moments to gather their thoughts.
- Each session includes a closing prayer service. The "leader" for prayer may be the facilitator or anyone else in the group. Ask for volunteers to be the leader and/or readers so that others can get involved.

To begin Session One, each person will be given a copy of the pastoral letter if they do not already have one. Each person will also need to bring a Bible to the sessions. Begin each session with a simple prayer of the leader's choosing and close with group prayer as presented in this study guide.

Session One

Group Sharing

My Family Story:

1. Do you know why your family immigrated to this country?
2. What obstacles would they have faced as they established themselves in a new homeland?
3. Can you describe any particular ways in which people here welcomed them or welcomed you?

Immigration and the Bible:

4. Why did Abraham and Sarah leave their homeland of Ur to immigrate to another land? (See Gn 12:1-10.)
5. What events brought the Hebrew ancestors from Canaan to Egypt? (See Gn 41:53–42:5; 46:1-7.)
6. What are the reasons that Hebrews left Egypt? (See Ex 1:8-14; 3:7-10; 19:3-8; Dt 26:5-10.)
7. Why did Joseph and Mary take their newborn son Jesus to Egypt rather than returning home? (See Mt 2:13-15.)
8. What do these stories tell you about how God calls forth faith in the midst of difficult life situations?

Human Solidarity and Human Dignity:

9. What experiences have you had that help you relate to being an outsider? How did you feel, and were there people who reached out to help?
10. Under what conditions could you imagine having to move your family or leave them for a time? Has this ever happened to you?
11. What are some of the obvious obstacles immigrants face upon entering a new country and culture?
12. What are some ways that we speak to one another that either affirms our human dignity or undermines it?
13. Name some of the human rights that all people share regardless of nationality, culture, race or gender. How do these rights reflect our identity as children of God? (See Gn 1:27; Jas 2:5.)

Note: All participants are asked to read I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me … *before Session Two.*

Closing Prayer

Invitation to Prayer

Leader: Jesus Christ is the light and life of the world.

All: And gives light to all peoples.

Leader: In a few moments of silence let us consider some new insight or challenge we each received in our discussion and sharing.

(Pause for 2-3 minutes of silent reflection.)

Scripture Reading

Reader A: *Come to the Lord, a living stone, rejected by humans, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

Reader B: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Reader C: *Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

1 Pt 2:4-5, 9-10

Intercessions

Leader: We pray for the faith we need to trust in God's hand as we are continually shaped into a spiritual house with room for all people.

All: May our hearts and minds be responsive to God's touch.

Leader: We pray for the courage we need to confront our own biases and seek forgiveness where needed.

All: May our hearts and minds be responsive to God's touch.

Leader: We pray for the will to desire a kingdom where all are welcome and all rights are honored and protected.

All: May our hearts and minds be responsive to God's touch.

Leader: We pray for the love that is necessary in our dealings with one another especially as we seek your truth and goodness.

All: May our hearts and minds be responsive to God's touch.

Leader: We pray for an abundance of hope that will energize us to help bring about God's kingdom.

All: May our hearts and minds be responsive to God's touch.

Leader: We pray together the prayer that reminds us that we are all children of one loving God.

All: Our Father, who art in heaven …

Sign of Peace



Session Two

Group Sharing

Context:

1. What most surprised you after reading the "Today's Context" section of *I Was a Stranger*? (See pages 6-8.)
2. How do the inalienable rights outlined in *I Was a Stranger* compare with the list of human rights you created at the end of last week's session? (See "Is Immigration an Intrinsic Human Right?" on pages 7 -9 and consider the footnotes in that section as well.)
3. Does a person's legal status limit that person's rights as a human being? Consider this statement from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:
   Respect for the human person proceeds by way of respect for the principle that "everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as 'another self,' above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity" [Gaudium et Spes 27]. No legislation could by itself do away with the fears, prejudices, and attitudes of pride and selfishness which obstruct the establishment of fraternal societies. Such behavior will cease only through the charity that finds in every person a 'neighbor,' a brother (or sister). [CCC §1931]

Principles and attitudes governing immigration:

4. How would you describe the relationship between the right to immigrate and the need to protect the common good? How has the good of our nation been threatened or enhanced by various waves of immigrants throughout our history? (See *I Was a Stranger*, pages 10-11.)
5. What are some of the privileges, and some of the responsibilities, that go along with having national borders? (See "What is the Point of National Borders" on pages 10-11).
6. In what ways have laws governing our borders in the U.S. facilitated the immigration of peoples, and how have they complicated it? (See information in Appendix II, pages 19-21, to help inform this discussion.)
7. What fears do you have about the number of immigrants entering the U.S. at this time in history? Does it help to have statistics about immigrant contributions to the economy, the actual threats posed or not posed by those who immigrate, etc.? (See Appendix I, pages 16-18, as well as the section on national borders.)
8. Why is "amnesty" an inadequate way to deal with immigrants who have either entered the country without legal status or overstayed their work permit? (See *I Was a Stranger*, page 11.)

The Christian Attitude of Welcome:

9. Pope John Paul II spoke of the tragedy of distancing ourselves from others, especially evident in various forms of intolerance toward groups distinguished by race or legal status (see *I Was a Stranger*, page 11). What attitudes and actions can you find in the following Scripture passages that challenge such intolerance?

Gn 18:1-10

_____

_____

Dt 24:14

_____

_____

Mt 25:31-46

_____

_____

Heb 13:2

_____

_____

10. Consider any situation where you felt like an outsider. What contributed to this feeling of alienation? What could others have done to help turn this situation around?

11. What do you find most challenging personally about the idea of welcoming those who come to this country with a different language, culture, economic or legal status?

13. When Moses traveled with former slaves through the desert, he enlisted the help of Hobab the Midianite to help them make their way through foreign lands (Nm 10:29-32). What are some of the foreign experiences that immigrants face as they enter a new land? What can others do to help them navigate the journey successfully and with their dignity as God's children intact?

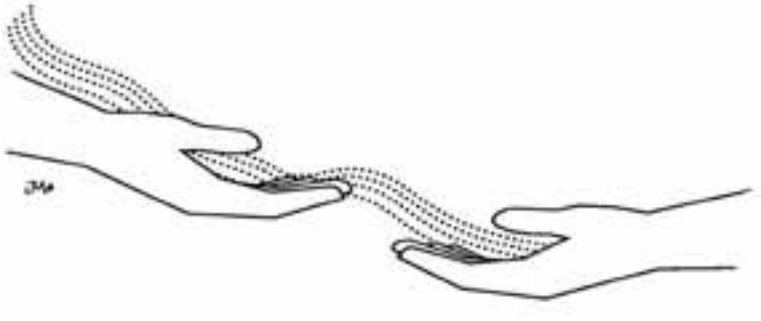
14. If you are an immigrant, share some of the challenges you faced or continue to face, and how others might have been helpful to you.

Legal Considerations:

15. In your experience, why are laws necessary for community living?

16. What factors help to determine whether or not particular laws are just? (See *I Was a Stranger*, page 11. Also consider the quote from John Paul II on the same page.)

17. Illegal immigration is a reality in our country. What are the three solutions proposed to remedy this situation? (See *I Was a Stranger*, page 12.)



Session Two

Closing Prayer

Invitation to Prayer

Leader: As we begin our prayer, let us pause in silence.

Call to mind our group discussion. Think of …

- one thing that makes you fearful.
- one thing that gives you hope.

(Pause for a couple of minutes of silence.)

Leader: Fear not, I am with you;
be not dismayed; I am your God.

All: I will strengthen you, and help you,
and uphold you with my right hand of justice.
(Is 41:10)

Scripture Reading

Reader: A reading from the Gospel According to Matthew:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." (Mt 1:20-23)

Leader: Pause in silence to consider God's promise to be with us, and how it is fulfilled in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Intercessions

Leader: In this holy season of Advent, we pray for our needs.

Leader: For trust in God's presence as we navigate our way to unity.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Leader: For trust in God's presence as we celebrate the diversity in our communities of faith.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Leader: For trust in God's presence as we hand over our fears, those that are legitimate and those that are imagined.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Leader: For trust in God's presence as we ask for the grace to be hospitable to others and grateful for help when we are in need.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Leader: For trust in God's presence as we look for just solutions to our national security needs and the needs of those searching for stability and a better life.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Leader: For trust in God's presence when we feel alienated or unwelcome.

All: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Closing Prayer

Leader: As we close our prayer together, let us pray together the words of the angel who visited Mary, asking that she not be afraid, and announcing the favor of God:

All: Hail Mary, full of grace …

Sign of Peace

Session Three

Group Sharing

Comprehensive Immigration Reform:

Review Appendix III, pages 21-22, of *I Was a Stranger,* which presents the outline of the comprehensive immigration reform proposed by the Catholic bishops of the U. S. and Mexico.

1. Which of the six elements listed there is easiest for you to understand and accept? Why?
2. Which of the six is the most difficult? Why?
3. Why do we as Catholics need to pay attention to issues related to immigration and any related legal reforms? (Include in your reflection a careful reading of what Pope Leo XIV says in his encyclical letter, *Magnifica Humanitas*, on page 15 of *I Was a Stranger*.)
4. Once the Hebrew slaves of Egypt passed through the wilderness, they settled in the land of Canaan and constructed laws to govern their communities. What did they have to say about aliens that settled in their lands, and about their own status as aliens at an earlier time?

Ex 23:9

_____

_____

Nm 15:15-16

_____

_____

Dt 23:8

_____

_____

Dt 24:17-22

_____

_____

Dt 27:19

_____

_____

Jer 7:5-7

_____

_____

The Need for Ongoing Conversion:

5. Read Lk 2:1-20. Respected citizens of Bethlehem found they could not make room for the young couple in need, but poor shepherds welcomed them. What lessons might there be in this story for our current situation?

6. What events have you witnessed or experienced that led to a deeper sense of empathy and community with people who were different from you in some way? Would you describe this as a conversion experience? (See 1 Cor 12:24b-26; 1 Pt 3:8.)

7. Where do you see the need for deepening conversion in our church, in your civic community, or in yourself, regarding the issue of immigration?

8. If the word "catholic" means universal, in what ways are we called not only to appreciate other cultures but also to learn more about our own cultures? How would this enhance our experience of Church?

Taking Action:

9. What positive steps will you take to continue exploring the issue of immigration in the light of faith? (These steps might include prayer, attempting to spend more time with people who are new to our country, sharing your own story with others if you are an immigrant, further study using some of the resources listed at the end of *I Was a Stranger*, etc.)



Session Three

Closing Prayer

Invitation to Prayer

Leader: You well know what it feels like to be an alien.

All: You were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. (Ex 23:9)

Leader: God, our strength, be our rock in times of change and anxiety.

All: Give us voice to proclaim your love, hands to do your deeds,
and energy to walk in your ways.

Scripture Reading

Reader: A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?" And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me." Then they will answer and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?" He will answer them, "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.
(Mt 25: 31-46)

(Pause for 2-3 minutes of silent reflection, considering where God may be asking you to respond at this time of Advent, and in this time in our history as a people.)

(continued ...)

Intercessions

Leader: Lord Jesus, speak to our hearts your words of life,

All: that we may recognize and listen to your voice.

Leader: Lord Jesus, prepare in our hearts the way of your return,

All: that we may make room for new direction in our journey with you.

Leader: Lord Jesus, bring low the mountains of our pride,

All: that we may learn your way of humility.

Leader: Lord Jesus, make straight our crooked paths,

All: that we may walk the path of justice and mercy with you.

Leader: Lord Jesus, reveal to us your glory,

All: that we may honor your presence in all we meet along the way.

Leader: Lord Jesus, we pray that our lives will be conformed to the image of God in which each of us has been created. Give us eyes to see the needs in our world, and insight to know how to respond as you would. Help us to use the bounty of this earth to set a table of plenty for all people, a table set with the food of compassion, justice, hospitality, and gratitude for your grace in our midst. Give us the resolve to act as you would act. We pray all of this in your name, Jesus, as children of a loving God, and through the power of the Spirit.

All: Amen.

Sign of Peace

Summary Outline

"I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me ..."

A Pastoral Letter on the Human Rights of Immigrants

Basic principles

1. The Church is obligated to proclaim the full truth of the Gospel in controversial areas of faith and morality about which there is confusion among the faithful.
   a. The human rights of undocumented immigrants is a moral issue of social justice.
   b. All humans have been *endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are the right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* (U.S. Declaration of Independence)
      i. Because they come to us from God, no government has the authority to deny us these rights. *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but to God what belongs to God.* (Mt 22:21)
      ii. Though inalienable, these rights are limited by the common good.
      iii. One such right is the right to immigrate when circumstances so require.
2. The *right to Life* includes the right of access to the basic necessities of life.
   a. Necessities include food, clothing, shelter, basic medical care, access to decent employment.
   b. Parents are obligated to protect their children and provide for them.
   c. If they cannot do so in their place of origin, there comes a point when persons are obligated to pursue other options, including immigration.
3. The *right to Liberty* and *the pursuit of Happiness* includes the right to participate in the life of the community.
   a. There are to be no second-class residents in the community.
   b. All have equal access to the exercise of power and the distribution of goods and services.

The reality of undocumented immigration

1. There are 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.
   a. There are impossible barriers placed on people who want to enter the U.S. legally.
   b. National borders have almost never prevented immigration when there were strong economic reasons for migration.
   c. Expelling 12 million people is not realistic historically, socially or economically.
   d. Only real choice: facilitate the process for the common good or try to create as much misery as possible — and reap the undesirable consequences.
2. The economic principle of supply and demand.
   a. There are insufficient legal avenues for immigrants to enter the U.S. compared to the number of jobs in need of workers.
   b. Insufficient opportunities for employment exist in the countries of origin.

The "common good"

1. The common good is the shared good of all residents of the community, the nation and by extension the entire human family.
   a. The common good is in contrast to the perceived self-interest of a particular nation or group within society.
   b. There are circumstances where the common good might prevent migration.
2. National borders are at the service of the common good, for example:
   a. They are necessary to create order within and security between nations.
   b. They protect the legitimate sovereignty and identity of the state.
   c. They enable the state to safeguard the rights of its members.
3. The rule of law is at the service of the common good.
   a. There is nothing sacred about the law in itself. *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.* (Mk 2:27)
      i. The law is sacred only insofar as it is rooted in truth and justice, and is in the service of the common good.
      ii. Unjust laws create disrespect for the rule of law, when people must evade the law in order to exercise their basic human rights.
   b. *Any government which refused to recognize human rights or acted in violation of them would not only fail in its duty; its decrees would be wholly without binding force.* (Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, par. 71)

The Church does not promote illegal immigration

1. The Church does support those who have no other alternative in the exercise of their basic human right to immigrate when circumstances so require.
2. The Church works to remove the causes of illegal immigration.
   a. The Church promotes policies that reflect the economic realities that underlie immigration and allow the free flow of otherwise law-abiding people.
   b. The Church works to remedy the international inequalities of wealth and foster economic development in migrant countries of origin.
   c. The Church works to create a system that welcomes immigrants, facilitates their adaptation to life in the United States and provides a timely and just path to citizenship.

— Bishop Anthony B. Taylor

Notes

Notes