

faith and development

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Mexican Immigration to the United States

AN URGENT NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH TO GLOBAL COMMUNITY

by Mary Christine Morkovsky*

Clandestine migration figures among the most serious human challenges of the new century. States try to check the phenomenon, international organizations sound the alarm. But, the most visible action is also the most brutal: closing the frontiers and warding off the "illegals". As to public opinion, too concerned with unemployment, it has remained inactive.

Dying "on the journey of hope": this ultimate misfortune has fallen 2300 times on the southern US frontier since 1995. The majority of victims were Mexican. In November 2004, a speaker at the International Congress of Superiors General of Religious Orders in Rome managed to say that the South is the "metaphor of human suffering caused by capitalism."

If migrations are a constitutive part of emergent civilizations, the Mexican "case" presents a particular reality: it opposes two societies which are themselves products of migration. One, on the North, has "succeeded"; it irresistibly attracts the neglected social stratum on the South. In the US, the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 has just aggravated the breakdown of ethical foundations in the name of security.

The famous "global village" would have wanted to loosen regulations around the movement of persons: and yet, here it is putting up barriers against migrant inflow. In this article, Mary Christine Morkovsky shows the urgency of developing a certain awareness which is taking time to get into priority political objectives in the Americas or in Europe.

Albert Longchamp

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A nation with a majority of citizens who are descendants of immigrants, the U.S. today is divided on the question of suitable immigration laws, policies, and treatment of migrants, especially those from its nearest southern neighbour, Mexico. Emotional issues such as personal suffering and death or fear for national security as well as social and political concerns like employ-

ment and national sovereignty are involved in the controversy.

In the border state of Texas, how to treat immigrants is not a theoretical exercise but a daily practical decision.

A permanent structural phenomenon

Migration is becoming a "permanent structural phenomenon" and "an important component of that growing interdependence among nation states that goes to make up globalization."(1) In 2002 there were 175 million international immigrants in the world. According to 2004 census figures, more than 24 million persons of Mexican origin were established in the U.S. The 11 million undocu-mented

immigrants in the U.S. in 2005 include more than six million Mexicans, according to *Pew Hispanic Center* report.

While the promotion of globalization and treaties like NAFTA (2) (North American Free Trade Agreement) and CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) facilitate the movement of goods, the circulation of human persons between Mexico and the U.S. is not becoming easier. Tensions are growing between those who desire to control and detain migrants for the sake of national security, especially since 9/11, and those who want to promote and defend the human rights of migrants. How attitudes and policies in the U.S. have changed from welcome to suspicion can be seen in legislation passed during the last century. Immigration from Europe to the U.S. reached over 8 million in 1901-1910, but since 1965 the major source has shifted from Europe to Latin America and Asia. In that year the original national origins quota system was abolished, and a seven-category preference system which placed priority on reuniting families, attracting needed skills, and accepting refugees was established.

Change in profile

Between 1964 and 1975 the U.S. minimum wage increased, and there was a fundamental change in the profile of Mexican immigrants. The number of women and city-dwellers rose. Because of mechanization the number of agricultural workers decreased while the number of workers in the industrial and service sectors such as cleaning, restaurants, hotels, *casi-nos*, and businesses increased.

In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) instated stronger penalties against illegal immigrants and criminal aliens and authorized a 14-mile-long triple fence at San Diego California. IIRIRA also authorized *"the detention and deportation of migrants for relatively minor offences, even after they have served their sentences."* (3)

After September 11, 2001 the bi-national agenda between the U.S. and Mexico for migration negotiations was suspended. In 2003 the Border Patrol, established in 1924, employed 4,000 agents and had a budget of 600 million dollars a year.

President George W. Bush on January 7, 2004 proposed immigration reform that drew much criticism. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, objected that it *"does not include a path to residency for those who participate in the temporary-worker program.[leaves] unclear what recourse a worker would have for unjust termination. [and provides for] no labour-market test to ascertain whether U.S. workers would be harmed by an influx of foreign workers. It relies on the employers and the market to determine the need."*(4)

The "Death Corridors"

The *REAL ID Act*, attached in January, 2005 to an \$81 billion appropriations bill for the war in Iraq and signed by the President on May 5, 2005 requires states to verify that applicants for driver's licenses are in the country legally, makes admission of asylum applicants more difficult, hires more border security agents, and waives any existing law considered a hindrance to the completion of the border fence. According to Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, head of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, the bill gives *"private 'bounty hunters, (6) access to law enforcement files for information on immigrants who might be in the country illegally (7)"* Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez stated: *"This measure has an anti-migrant side, without a doubt."*

In Mexico, Senator Héctor Osuña of the *National Action Party* (NAC), concerned about the rising migrant death toll, introduced a bill to dispatch local, state, and federal law enforcement officers to the most dangerous *"death corridors"* on the border to impede Mexican migrants from crossing. Fellow senators accused him of *"stomping on the Mexican Constitution, and migrant advocates likened him to xenophobic U.S. activists."*(8)

Why does the number of immigrants entering through the southern border of the U.S. continue to increase in spite of border enforcement strategies and INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) blockade initiatives such as *"Operation Hold the Line"* (El Paso, 1993), *"Operation Gatekeeper"* (San Diego, 1994), and

"Operation Safeguard" (southern Arizona, 1995)? Why are immigrants not deterred, for example, by the fact that since 1995 over 2,300 migrants have died attempting to cross into the U.S. or the fact that 19 undocumented immigrants were asphyxiated in a trailer near Victoria, Texas in May 2003?

Mistreatment is no secret. U.S. border officials often treat undocumented persons like criminals and *"routinely detain and deport migrants without giving them a hearing before an immigration judge. (...) Of the just over 180,000 total removals from the U.S. in FY 1999 and FY 2000, 81%... were Mexican."*(9)

Heavily armed "Minutemen"

The root causes of immigration are economic injustice and armed conflicts as well as poverty and religious intolerance. When these causes are not addressed in their homeland, migrants exercise a God-given human right to provide the basic necessities for their families when they seek a dignified occupation and just wage. Often today the only way to surmount poverty and lack of employment, especially in rural areas of Mexico, is to try to find work north of the border. The *Pew Hispanic Center* estimates that U.S. businesses create a demand for 485,000 immigrant workers annually while only 5,000 visas are available for these workers. Necessity and desperation rather than choice drive impoverished Mexicans to cross the border without legal documentation and endure heat, cold, hunger, and even torture or being hunted down by irate ranchers on the border.

In Arizona they may encounter *"Minutemen,"*(10) heavily armed volunteers determined to rectify what they consider *"chaotic neglect"* by those applying U.S. immigration law. Nine religious organizations signed an April 13, 2005 statement opposing the *"Minutemen"* and supporting unity events to remedy the xenophobia, fear, and division perpetuated by their actions.(11)

Migrants coming north are often forced to bribe Mexican police as well as pay exorbitant sums to *"coyotes"* to shepherd them across the border. Migrant traffickers selectively enslave some undocumented immigrant workers, as prostitutes or field hands. Lou DeBaca, U.S. Justice Department attorney, says many of the 16,000 estimated cases of enslaved migrants in the U.S. each year are Mexicans.

Between 100 -150 slavery victims have testified against migrant smugglers, but they fear to return to Mexico lest their families be harmed. (12)

Mexican enforcement of immigration laws is "marked by corruption, police brutality, and systemic abuses of basic human rights,"(13) while on the U.S. side undocumented immigrants must hide from the border patrol and immigration officials and adjust to being considered as foreboding aliens or even terrorists.

Keeping one's identity secret

Pastors and counsellors help immigrants deal with problems, many of which are associated with the disruption of family life. Married men or women working in the North are faced with temptations to infidelity. They miss the support of relatives and friends as well as the opportunity to participate actively in raising their children. Long working hours as well as adapting to an unfamiliar language, climate and customs sap their energy. The constant vigilance needed to keep one's identity secret or to dodge immigration agents burden undocumented workers.

Migration is straining Mexican families in various ways. 41.7% of women immigrants from Mexico are married and often leave children behind under the care of grandmothers and other relatives so the mothers can work, usually as housekeepers and nannies. When families are deported, minor children are sometimes separated from their parents. Health, particularly mental health of migrant families, is becoming increasingly worrisome; and cases of AIDS are increasing. 400,000 people live in more than 1,800 *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border. These unincorporated subdivisions often lack basic water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe housing. According to a study by the U.S.-Mexico Border Counties Coalition, border communities spend about \$1.8 million a year on undocumented immigrants, mostly on emergency care, incarceration, autopsies, and burials.

The United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families views workers - legal or illegal - as social entities with families who have rights, including

the right to family reunification. It went into effect July 1, 2003. Mexico as signed this convention, but the United States has not.

Opportunity for dialogue

Hostility to immigrants is rooted in a human tendency to resist change and to consider what is new or different to be evil. Those who are satisfied with a given situation will resist anyone who tries to alter or challenge it. The presence of aliens raises basic questions about the meaning of life, suffering, poverty, hunger, sickness and death. It provides opportunity for dialogue that respects the identity of persons of a different culture, appreciates the positive aspects of that culture, and promotes offering the positive elements of that culture for the service of humanity.

Mexicans in particular are bearers of deep cultural values such as hospitality, loyalty to family and community, and appreciation of art as well as rich faith traditions of trust in God's Providence and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. A 2004 survey by the *Pew Hispanic Center* showed that 93% of Latinos in the U.S. consider it important to maintain their distinct cultures. Surmounting the problems of living with persons who are different, citizens can welcome the truly human values of the immigrants and rediscover shared convictions. They can include the strangers and involve them in community life, avoiding cultural ghettos on the one hand and total assimilation on the other.

Hospitality, respectful dialogue, and strong mutual interest in cooperation can lead to communion and integration that celebrates differences and pro-motes international solidarity. Great civilizations of the past have resulted from the amalgamation of peoples rather than the exclusive dominance of a particular ethnic or religious group. Until borders are transformed from barriers into points of convergence and integration, there can be no true liberty for humanity.

"We are strangers no longer"

The suffering of migrants has long preoccupied church personnel on both sides of the border concerned not only about the practice and transmission of the faith but the integrity of the family and decent living and working conditions. In 2003 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the *Conferencia del*

Episcopado Mexicano issued a bilingual joint document, "*Strangers No Longer—Together on the Journey of Hope*" that emphasized five principles guiding the church's view on migration issues:

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
- Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

In New York, 40 parishes have united since 1997 under the direction of Brother Joel Magallán, S.J., a native of Mexico, to provide work and programs to serve migrants. In 1999-2001, 120 North American Jesuits in cooperation with their Mexican counterparts organized projects to accompany and serve Hispanic migrants.

An example of a group which focuses on the possibilities rather than the liabilities of migration is "*Sin Fronteras*," which was initiated in 1995 by a group of academics and researchers in Mexico. This non-governmental organization promotes research and publication on the topic of migration as well as solidarity among diverse groups such as shelters, social assistance, and advocates for migrants. At least 38 shelters offering 1,832 beds have been set up, mostly on the northern border, 16 of them by Catholics and others by Methodists, the Salvation Army, and the YMCA.(14)

An important contribution to the US economy

Opportunities presented by the current immigrant situation are economic and social as well as pastoral. Mexican citizens working in the U.S. sent home \$13.3 billion in 2003, thus providing one of the largest sources of foreign currency in Mexico. The majority of remittance receivers are women. In Mexico a group called "*Res por Uno*" promotes the channelling of foreign currency into social works and productive projects. Mexican immigrants, however, spend more money in the U.S. than they send home. Thus besides providing cheap and necessary labour, they make an important contribution to the U.S. economy through paying taxes, purchasing consumer goods, and making investments.

Their purchasing power was more than \$378 billion in 2003. Although blamed

for draining public funds, in many cases, immigrants pay taxes but receive no services in return. Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri in written testimony on April 13, 2005 to the U.S. House Subcommittee for the Western Hemisphere objected to the term “*illegals*.” He suggested that in keeping with the market model, undocumented migrants are better described as businessmen without goods who are searching for the U.S. dream.

The 2004 Vatican “*Instruction on the Pastoral Care of Migrants*” points out that exaggerated nationalism as well as “*hatred and systematic or violent exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities*” are the sources of increasing migration, which “*raises a*

truly ethical question: the search for a new international economic order for a more equitable distribution of the goods of the earth.” Most borders and boundaries today are imposed, not natural, and have achieved neither international peace nor national security, much less world or environmental security.

The conflict and suffering of Mexican immigrants coming to Texas may be seen as the birth pangs of a new world order that, unlike the present United Nations, will not enshrine the sovereignty of states. Rosalie Bertell points out that human beings already “*live in biotic communities, each with distinct geography, climate, plant and animal species, cultures and languages*”(15) and may be evolving

to a bio-regionalism that will replace nation states. For this change to occur, cooperation and acceptance of interdependence would have to replace national sovereignty and geographical isolation.

Migration calls for a new vision of the world community considered as a family of peoples for whom the goods of the earth are ultimately destined. This is a bigger dream than the “U.S. dream” that attracts migrants from Mexico. This is the dream of every human being: to be accepted in his or her uniqueness and to partake of the fruits of the earth in harmony with others made in the Creator’s likeness.

Mary Christine Morkovsky

- (1) Pontifical Council, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, May 3, 2004 #s1 and 4.
- (2) Better known in France as ALENA.
- (3) U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” pastoral letter (Washington, D.C: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003) # 92.
- (4) Bishop Thomas G. Wenski testimony before Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship, Feb. 12, 2004, in *Origins* 33, 37 (Feb. 26, 2004), p. 631.
- (5) In the USA, bounty hunters, employed by authorized persons, are hired and paid to chase criminals or fugitives.
- (6) *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 May 2005, p.12
- (7) *San Antonio Express News*, 12 May 2005, p. 12A
- (8) Hernán Rozemberg, *San Antonio Express-News*, May 2, 2005, pp. 1A and 7A.
- (9) Strangers no longer, p.40
- (10) Extremely mobile handpicked force “ready to march and fight at a minute’s notice”, called upon, in the 18th century, to protect cities from warlike invasions.
- (11) *Catholic News Service Briefs* website
- (12) Mark Stevenson, *San Antonio Express-News*, May 3, 2005, p. 8A.
- (13) Strangers no longer, p.83 and 40
- (14) *Young Men’s Christian Association*
- (15) A Feminist Approach to Leadership” in “*Breakthrough News*” of the Global Education Associates, January-April, 2005, p. 5.

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