

Carrying the Dreams of the Poor

You must relieve the lot of the poor,
clothe the naked and visit the sick.

Never turn away when someone needs your help.

Your way of acting must be different from the world's way.
All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ,
for he himself will say: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'

Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving the poor and pilgrims,
for in them more particularly Christ is received.

RULE OF BENEDICT

THE MONASTERY CHAPEL IS QUIET AND DARK as brothers and guests gather for Compline, the closing prayer of the day. Night Prayer is like a bridge, arching from the dusk of one day toward the dawn of the next. The psalms (4, 91, and 134) are the same each night, chanted from memory, a steady plea to be heard by the God of Justice (Ps. 4:1). "When you call, I shall answer, 'I am with you.' I will save you in distress and give you glory" (Ps. 91:15). Only the hymns vary, expressing our hopeful prayer for renewal—personal, communal, and global. One of the hymns we sing to close the day is *María of All the Americas*. One of its verses proclaims, "O Mary, courageous sister, / bearing God's love made flesh, / your hands carry the dreams of the poor."¹ The language has layers of meaning: Mary's hands carrying Jesus, God's love made flesh, as God's advocate for the poor; Mary gently cupping her open hands to tend and protect the aspirations of the disenfranchised.

In the nearly five-hundred-year-old poetic narrative of the Guadalupe Event in Mexico (the *Nican Mopohua*, a text originally written in the Nahuatl language), the Virgin of Guadalupe utters these words of commitment to the impoverished and excluded indigenous people: *Oir sus lamentos. Remediar sus miserias, penas, y dolores*. "I will listen to their laments, and remedy all their miseries, misfortunes, and sorrows." As the day ends, we are asked, Are our hands open? What do they carry? Whose dreams and aspirations do we tend and protect? These questions, too, can be a bridge, leading us from today toward the dawn of God's reign of justice.

Yes, what we need are *bridges*: points of connection between nations, cultures, and races; places of sharing, where the dignity of the other is respected, and the needs of the poor redressed. Yet, as we write, our nation is gripped by the passions of xenophobia, the fear of the *other*. Often, it is not *fear* but *hatred* of the migrant. A globalized free-market economic system—dominated by the United States—with corporate profit as the driving force, has left the majority of the people of Mexico and Central America nearly destitute, with no means to feed their own families.² The decision to leave loved ones, culture, and land for work in *el Norte* is not taken lightly. It is an excruciatingly painful choice, made when one can no longer stand to see one's children go hungry. Migrants face extreme dangers along the U.S.-Mexican border, as hundreds die each year in the desert from exposure and dehydration. Those immigrants who eventually make their way into the United States, from whatever country, are often treated as criminals, or worse.



The archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony, wrote in March of this year, “The unspoken truth of the immigration debate is that at the same time as our nation benefits economically from the presence of undocumented workers, we turn a blind eye when they are exploited by employers. They work in industries that are vital to our economy, yet they have little legal protection and no opportunity to contribute fully to our nation. While we gladly accept their taxes and sweat, we do not acknowledge or uphold their basic labor rights.”³

Leaders of government and commerce refuse to take responsibility for the inhuman consequences of “Free Trade” and profit-driven globalization. The desperately poor, already vulnerable, are made the scapegoats for our failures in enacting justice. Instead, vigilante groups patrol the border between the United States and Mexico; a 370-mile wall is under construction, separating our two peoples; and the president plans to dispatch 6,000 members of the National Guard to police *la frontera*, the border.

Xenophobia is fueled by a false ideology of scarcity, which tells us that we must ever be wary of the other, and that our interests and theirs are always in competition and are mutually exclusive.

Yet this spring, we also witnessed a mobilization of “undocumented” persons in our major cities, affirming their manifold contribution to this country, the richness of their cultures, and their desire to simply provide for their families in a world held captive by an economic system beyond their control. Leaders of many faith traditions addressed the conscience of the nation, defending the human rights of all immigrants, whether documented or undocumented. Many of these immigrants have ancestral roots here, reaching back to a time when the present Southwest of the U.S. was *northern Mexico*. As many have said, “it was the border which moved, not us.” The Mexican-American essayist Richard Ródríguez has written, “At the same time, we are seeing the reunion of the hemisphere from another angle. America is discovering itself within the Americas. This is quite a new discovery for a country that has traditionally written its history from east to west. Now it is populated by millions of people, here legally and illegally, who describe the U.S. as *El Norte*. Their presence forces the country to also imagine itself anew along a north-south axis.”⁴ What we need are *bridges*.

The Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar, secretary general of the National Council of Churches, addressed an interfaith gathering on immigration reform, stating, “As Christians, we believe that we are called to advocate for policies and mindsets that do not foster hate and perpetuate fear and discrimination. That is why we strongly urge Congress and the president to pass comprehensive immigration reform that upholds the dignity of all people, and reflects the principles for which our nation was founded. Except for Native Americans, who were here when the boat landed, and African Americans who were brought here on slave ships, and Mexicans who were the original inhabitants of most of the Southwest, once we too were strangers in this land.”⁵

At the same gathering, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick addressed the need for a humane, respectful immigration policy. “All sides in the debate agree on one thing: our nation's immigration policy is flawed and needs to be repaired. It is a matter of human justice. Every day, we see the human consequences of this flawed system... [and] are called upon daily to respond to the many needs of new immigrants, hard-working people who have fled their homeland in despair and fear. They ask us for a loving heart, a helping hand, for medical care, for legal assistance, and counseling. We see families separated, workers exploited, and migrants abused by smugglers, and who sometimes even die in the desert.”⁶



Cardinal McCarrick continues: “Changing the status quo is an issue of moral gravity. ... Any legislation [of comprehensive immigration reform] must include: (1) policy directions which address *the root causes of migration*, such as economic development, so that migrants can remain in their home countries to support themselves and their families; (2) reform of our immigration system, including the adoption of an earned legalization program for undocumented workers and their families; a temporary worker program with appropriate protections for both U.S. and foreign workers; and a reform of the family preference system, so that families can be reunited in a timely fashion; (3) restoration of due process protections for immigrants to allow them to 'have their day in court,' consistent with American values.”⁷

To truly be persons of faith, we must renounce the ideology of scarcity, and the toxic attitudes and deeds which it breeds. Our faith traditions are rooted in the living experience of a God of bounty, who challenges us to share; a God who is not our “tribal god,” but whose concern is for the *common good* of all; a God of boundless compassion, who commands us to “neither mistreat strangers nor oppress them, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt.” A God who has made this everlasting covenant: *Oir sus lamentos. Remediar sus penas y dolores*. “I will listen to their laments, and remedy their pains and sufferings.”⁸

This is the challenge confronting us today, articulated so well by the poet Robert Frost, “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.” What we need are bridges. *We are to be those bridges*.⁹ †

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1. “María of All the Americas,” from the recording [With an Everlasting Love](#), © 2003 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont Inc.
 2. Unemployment rates alone reach 70% in Nicaragua and Guatemala, and above 40% in Mexico—accompanied by *under*-employment, and the collapse of agricultural and other industries. This is due to the privatization of industries, foreign owned corporations moving their plants to other countries where the wages are “cheaper,” and the importation of agricultural and other products by multi-national corporations, making it impossible for locally grown or made products to compete. “Free Trade” is not *fair* trade.
 3. Roger Mahony, “Obey the Gospel, Not the Law that is Unjust,” *Signs of the Times in the Americas*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2006.
 4. Richard Rodríguez, “America's Impure Genius,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2006.
 5. Dr. Bob Edgar, from a speech delivered at an inter-faith gathering on immigration issues, at the United Methodist Building in Washington, D.C., March 1, 2006. <http://www.nccusa.org/news/060302immigrations.html>.
 6. Theodore McCarrick, March 1, 2006. <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/mccarrick.shtml>
 7. *ibid.* See also the [Interfaith Statement in Support of Comprehensive Immigration Reform](#), October 18, 2005.
 8. Excellent resources on immigration and immigrants' rights can be found on the websites of the [American Friends Service Committee](#); the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#); [Border Links](#); and [Latin America Working Group](#).

9. The [Center for Latino Spirituality and Culture](#) at the University of Notre Dame has produced an extraordinary documentary, *Dying to Live: A Migrant's Journey*. The Center describes the film in these words: “*Dying to Live* is a profound look at the human face of the immigrant. It explores who these people are, why they leave their homes, and what they face in their journey. Drawing on the insights of Pulitzer Prize winning photographers, theologians, Church and congressional leaders, activists, musicians, and the immigrants themselves, this film exposes the places of conflict, pain, and hope along the U.S.-Mexico border. It is a reflection on the human struggle for a more dignified life, and the search to find God in the midst of the struggle.”

Information can be found on the [Center's website](#). Another extraordinary window onto the life, struggles, and faith of migrants is the book *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit*, by Daniel G. Groody, CSC (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). The author is an assistant professor of theology at the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

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