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Latina Magnificat: What women know about immigration

Pat Marrin | Oct. 19, 2010 NCR Today

If you have childhood memories of travel, your mother probably figures prominently in the images you carry. Women take care of the details -- the packing, the food, first-aid -- and the needs of the children, physical and emotional.

Try to imagine a mother from Central America getting ready to set out with her daughter on the long journey to the border. Or the women waiting by the phone in Mexico for word that their husband and teenage son have made it across and are somewhere safe.

Death has come to thousands in the desert, and each death is more than a statistic. A small body, devoured by the sun on the desert floor, wears a new pair of jeans with a shiny belt buckle.

Women have always borne the greatest suffering in the movement of families, as forced travelers or in refugee camps, or in a new city, as a tired, frightened group of adults and children settle into a new life, economic survival, adapting to new customs and a new language.

When NAFTA rules let cheap North American corn flood markets in Mexico, subsistence farmers could not compete, were forced to sell their land to big growers of coffee or other export crops. Whole towns were abandoned, as men sought work in the cities or headed north on the word that jobs were plentiful in the United States. Families wait for word. Women wait for remittance checks, wait for years to see their husbands, who sometimes remarry in the north, never return.

That women attempt to migrate at all is a sign of desperation, and of enormous love that they are willing to risk everything, even separation from their children, to go on ahead to establish a safe haven where they can reunite the family, make a new start. On the journey they are harassed, raped, robbed by soldiers and swindled by coyotes -- professional smugglers who demand thousands of dollars to lead the perilous and uncertain journey to the promised land. If they survive and cross the border, women work as domestics, in nursing homes, hotels, meat processing plants and other jobs no American wants.

The picture albums of one generation show the sacrifices of the previous one, parents, aunts and uncles, in their best clothes for the camera, showing weary, determined faces, thinking about another work week ahead, the night shift, the late shift, the long bus ride. What was true 100 years ago is true today. Immigrants represent the bravest, most determined and hardest-working people a poor country gives up to reinvigorate its neighbors, and among the most tragic and heroic are the women.

Immigration reform is complicated and many competing interests must be satisfied to produce a policy that works. Border control, land rights, the rule of law, employer needs, worker rights form a foundation of justice on which to place human rights, compassion, family preservation as values no society can dispense with. The debate is not about affirming sentiment over logic, but about priorities, genuine dilemmas, conscience and morality.

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The experience of women enlightens the process, reveals essential human needs that take precedence over rhetoric and rules. Jeanette Rodriguez, a professor at Seattle University and an internationally known expert on Latin American theology and religion, gender and cultural diversity, will be with us Jan. 12-14, 2011, in San Antonio at the Celebration Conference on Effective Liturgy, "A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church's Global Commitment to the Poor." She will talk on "Latina Magnificat: Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Call to Justice. Please join us. The issues are critical and the timing could not be better.

Join us at *Celebration*'s Conference on Effective Liturgy: A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church?s Global Commitment to the Poor. [1]

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[1] http://celebrationpublications.org/conference