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Reflections on an immigration journey

by Pat Marrin



A man prays during a vigil protest against Arizona's controversial S.B. 1070 immigration law outside the state capitol in Phoenix July 28. (CNS photo)

Thanksgiving, despite its overwhelming identification as a day for feasting and football, remains for most of us a family day of commemoration and gratitude. Many families will count their blessings by helping serve at a community meal or by expanding their family table to include the less fortunate. Those who gather around the eucharistic table will find the holy day in the holiday and be reminded that God is the source of all our blessings.

History is a good teacher. The first Thanksgiving found the pilgrims, as immigrants to the new world to escape religious persecution, in desperate need. The native peoples shared their farming and hunting skills and helped the first colonists survive. The images of this first celebration of generosity and gratitude survive in our children's school plays and in our church services.

The church has long described itself as a pilgrim people. Our Judeo-Christian identity is grounded in the Exodus, the escape from slavery to freedom and the long journey through the desert to the promised land. Black churches find their motive and meaning in this pilgrimage. Every wave of immigration, from the

Irish of the 1850s to the Vietnamese of the 1970s to the millions of desperate people driven north from their homes in Latin America by poverty and violence, can see its face in the image of the pilgrims.

The rich complexity of this history continues to challenge America in the post-9/11 world of orange alerts and stoked fears of strangers as enemies. The political debate is made more difficult by the strident nativist voices of those who have forgotten their own immigrant origins and seek to close the door and seal the border, to hunt down and purge newcomers who don't look like them or talk like them. Even as the nation feasts on the bounty of our harvests and slaughterhouses, can we ignore those whose labor delivered it to the table?

Thanksgiving is the feast of hospitality. As we count our blessings, we also consider who is new to our table. How many among us, our families, friends and neighbors, have experienced unemployment or difficulty in paying bills, or have been forced to relocate or move back in with parents or relatives to make ends meet? What would their Thanksgiving be like this year without the support of family, the community, the churches?

God's abundance belongs to everyone. If we are blessed, we can continue in that blessing only by making sure there is room at the table for all God's children. This is how we give thanks.

Pat Marrin is editor of Celebration, NCR's sister publication. Celebration will host a conference on the church's role in immigration reform this coming January in San Antonio. Click here for more information on the program and speakers.

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