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LA Archbishop Gomez, Pope Francis fight indifference to immigrants

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 12, 2013 All Things Catholic

At some point during my childhood in western Kansas, though I don't recall exactly when, we were given a basic course in Kansas history. It focused on famous personalities linked to the state: Dwight D. Eisenhower, for instance, and Amelia Earhart, and William Allen White (a famed 19th-century newspaperman in Emporia and leader of the Progressive movement.)

One name I never heard growing up, however, was Fr. Juan de Padilla, believed by many to be the first martyr of the Americas.

The Franciscan missionary and companion of Coronado went to his death at the hands of the Quivira Indians in 1542, just about 100 miles as the crow flies from where I grew up. Coronado and his soldiers had already abandoned Kansas in frustration over not finding a city of gold, but de Padilla stayed behind in the belief that the real treasure was the people of the New World.

According to Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, that omission in my schooling illustrates a serious defect with the way America's national story is transmitted and understood.

Gomez has a new book out called *Immigration and the Next America: Renewing the Soul of Our Nation* *[1]*, published by Our Sunday Visitor. A large part of his argument is that selective memory underlies America's ambivalence on immigration, specifically the way American history generally begins with Anglo-Protestant statesmen rather than Hispanic Catholic missionaries.

A native of Monterrey, Mexico, and a naturalized American citizen, Gomez insists that "the Hispanic presence has deep roots in this soil."

"Long before America had a name, long before there was a Washington, D.C., or a Wall Street, this land was Spanish and Catholic," Gomez says in the book. "Every American today, in some way, owes a spiritual debt to these great Hispanic Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."

As part of that landscape, Gomez reminds American Catholics of their immigrant roots and argues that Catholics have a special obligation to promote compassion.

At the level of policy, Gomez grants the need for greater border security and concedes that there "is no single authentic 'Catholic position' on immigration." That said, he lays out a four-point program for what a saner approach to immigration would look like.

- Give undocumented immigrants the chance to earn permanent residency and eventually citizenship, especially the majority who have been in the country five years or more.
- Put a moratorium on deportations, except for people guilty of serious crimes.
- Promote economic reform and development in Latin America, especially in the region's poorest countries,

to reduce the incentive to migrate.
- Protect the most vulnerable migrants, especially women and children, against human trafficking and other abuses.

The heart of the argument from Gomez, in a mantra he repeats throughout the book, is that "immigration is about more than immigration."

In effect, he believes, debates over immigration reform are proxies for larger tensions over the "next America" currently taking shape, one destined to be significantly less white and less European, shaped by new arrivals from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The question, as he sees it, is: Which will prevail in shaping public policy about these transitions: nativist fears and prejudice or America's national ideals of equality and opportunity?

More information on the book. [1]

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Speaking of immigrants, Pope Francis devoted his first trip outside Rome on Monday to a powerful statement of solidarity.

The pontiff traveled to the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa [2], a major point of arrival for migrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking entry into Europe. He wanted to commemorate the roughly 20,000 people who have died trying to make the crossing and to show compassion for those who survived.

Upon arrival, Francis boarded a boat to toss a wreath into the sea in honor of the dead. He was overheard confessing concern that people wouldn't understand the spirit of his visit. This was supposed to be a penitential act, he said, not a pep rally.

If anyone did miss the point, it wasn't for Francis' lack of trying. The visuals were stunning: The pope vested in penitential purple for the day and celebrated Mass at an altar made from the wood of a boat used by migrants crossing the sea. He spoke from an ambo that displayed its rudder and carried a pastoral cross and used a chalice also made from the boat's wood.

Francis stood with the immigrants and listened to their stories, at one point stopping under a banner that read, "You're one of us!"

(Jorge Mario Bergoglio, of course, is the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina. He said on the night of his election to the papacy that the cardinals had summoned him to Rome from the "end of the world," making him now something of an immigrant himself.)

The heart of his message Monday was a strong condemnation of what Francis called a "globalization of indifference" vis-à-vis the suffering of people driven from their homes in search of a better life.

His homily culminated with an explicit mea culpa.

"Lord, we beg forgiveness for our indifference to so many of our brothers and sisters," Francis said. "Father, we ask your pardon for those who are complacent and closed amid comforts which have deadened their hearts; we beg your forgiveness for those who by their decisions on the global level have created situations that lead to these tragedies."

Later in the day, he sent a tweet [3] that distilled the spirit of the outing: "We pray for a heart which will

embrace immigrants. God will judge us upon how we have treated the most needy."

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After a diplomatic silence of about 24 hours, political forces in Italy associated with a harder line on immigration began reacting to the pope's outing. Some offered polite shades of nuance; others expressed open contempt.

Fabrizio Cicchitto, head of the right-wing People of Liberty party in the Italian parliament, said "religious preaching" is one thing while "managing a difficult problem on the part of the state" is quite another. He said the pope's comments illustrate the need for a "serious and real autonomy of the state from the church."

Erminio Boso, a spokesperson for the far-right Northern League, was considerably less restrained. Announcing that he's happy when a boatload of would-be immigrants capsizes, Boso said: "I don't care about the pope ... what I'd ask is that he provide money and land for these extra-communitarians," referring to migrants trying to enter Europe.

Roberto Calderoli, another member of the Northern League and a former minister in the government of Silvio Berlusconi, noted that the Vatican itself has a police force that physically expels people who attempt unauthorized entry.

Calderoli said the pope's remarks at Lampedusa were "beautiful and touching, but the laws are something else, as those in vigor in the Vatican demonstrate."

Giuliano Ferrara, a popular conservative pundit, rebuked Francis for not being sufficiently enthusiastic about globalization. Ferrara also, by the way, said Benedict XVI is "the most extraordinary Christian thinker of the century," while Francis speaks from the heart. (Ferrara actually used an off-color Italian idiom meaning, roughly, that Francis shoots from the hip, suggesting that his comments may sometimes lack precision.)

La Repubblica, Italy's center-left paper of record, could barely contain its glee.

After years in which the center-right could bank on the Vatican's support because of its positions on "nonnegotiable" matters such as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage, the paper wrote Wednesday, conservatives suddenly find themselves "orphans" under a pope who emphasizes "proclaiming the gospel without gloss, which means attention to the least and to the poor."

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Whatever Italians made of it, arguably no one in the United States was more thrilled with the pope's performance than Gomez, who said he hopes it will help convince the Catholic grass roots that immigration is not merely an economic or political question but a "moral issue."

(Gomez, by the way, is conventionally seen as fairly conservative on doctrinal and moral questions, another illustration of how seeing everything through the prism of left v. right often runs out of gas. Let's put it his way: If he were Italian, he probably wouldn't be a big fan of *La Repubblica*'s editorial line.)

I caught up with Gomez on Tuesday by phone in El Paso, Texas, where he was attending the installation Mass for Bishop Mark Seitz. We spoke about his book, the prospects for immigration reform in 2013, and the pope in Lampedusa.

The following are excerpts from the interview.

***Allen*: I grew up in Kansas and attended Catholic schools, yet I never heard the story of Fr. Juan de Padilla. You would say, I take it, this illustrates a problem with the way we teach American history?**

Gomez: My point is that our history in the United States is incomplete, and there are many reasons for that. One is that history is usually written by the winners, and another is that our understanding was conditioned by a "black legend" against Catholics, which, in turn, reflected problems between England and Spain at the time the country was founded. Whatever the explanation, this is an important part of the story that people generally don't know, and we need to know it.

You believe it would influence how we think about immigration?

When you know about the effort these people put into bringing the fruits of the Gospel to this country, it's simply amazing. Think about Antonio Margil de Jesús [a Spanish missionary to Mexico and Texas in the early 18th century]. He made seven trips between Mexico and Houston back in the early 1700s, making unbelievable sacrifices to bring civilization and Christianity to these lands. I believe the appreciation Americans have for Hispanics would be very different if they knew they were here from the very beginning and were important in the development of this country.

Here's another piece of the story: Jean-Baptiste Lamy became the first archbishop of Santa Fe after he moved from Cincinnati to what's now New Mexico in 1850. [Note: Lamy was the inspiration for Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.] When he arrived in Santa Fe, he had to learn Spanish. He started out speaking French and then learned English, but in Santa Fe, his people spoke Spanish, and all his homilies were in Spanish. Missionaries such as Lamy had no other purpose than to build a great civilization on these lands, and I think it gives us a different understanding to appreciate how much of that was done in Spanish.

On the subject of language, by the way, we don't have to worry about the disappearance of English as the national language. The children of today's immigrants are going to grow up speaking English.

You write that immigration is unlike abortion or marriage in that there's no single correct Catholic position. Let me ask you this: Do you think a Catholic in good conscience can support the status quo?

No, I don't. I think we all know the system is broken. It has horrible consequences for the people who are here already, creating a sense of fear and a permanent underclass. It's also broken for the people who aren't here yet because it offers no legal way to come into the country and forces them to risk their lives. It's not morally right.

Your point is that there may be no single Catholic solution, but no Catholic in good faith can deny there's a problem?

That's correct. We can't ignore the suffering of these people because they're God's children.

Pastors often say they don't like to preach on immigration because their people are divided. What's your sense of opinion at the Catholic grass roots?

We have statistics at the bishops' conference showing that roughly 70 percent of American Catholics agree we need immigration reform, but I know it's a divisive issue. I think part of the problem is that many Catholics don't know exactly what the church supports or what we bishops are saying. For instance, nobody is supporting illegal immigration. We favor legal immigration.

Anytime I speak out, I get angry emails and letters, which is part of the reason I wrote the book. We're not advocating breaking laws, but we have 11 million people here now, and we need to find a solution. We have to

find ways for people to move legally from one country to another. What we're creating is a system that leaves a whole group of people unequal with no access to citizenship.

I know the reaction among a lot of Catholics [to pro-immigrant positions] is negative, but if they really knew what's going on and reflected on it, I believe they'll change their opinion.

What do you think the political prospects are right now for immigration reform?

I'm hopeful something is going to happen. There's a political movement, as we saw in the Senate, to work something out on a bipartisan basis. On the other hand, I also worry that because of the political realities, they won't be able to finish it. If they don't get it done by the end of the summer or the early fall, the issue will probably be dead for at least two years, because we're heading into another election cycle.

What did you think of the pope's visit to Lampedusa?

I think the Holy Father showed his concern by going there and saying clearly that this isn't right. We need to help people understand that we're not just talking about policies, but about the lives of men, women and children who are just like us. We're going to put out a statement at the bishops' conference saying that Pope Francis went [to Lampedusa] to honor the people who have died making the crossing into Europe, and the same thing happens in our country with people coming across the southern border.

I think his decision to make the trip, and then what he said, asking forgiveness for the way we neglect the people coming into our countries, shows that opening our hearts to immigrants is an essential part of the Catholic faith. Remember that Jesus himself and the Holy Family were immigrants. Care for the stranger and the immigrant is a core element of the faith, and the pope has reminded us of that in a powerful way.

The next time you get an angry call or letter, will you be tempted to say, "Look at the pope"?

Absolutely! The trip was an eye-opener. He made the point that this debate isn't just about the economy, and these people aren't just another number or something to fear. These are our brothers and sisters. His first trip was to reach out to these people and ask forgiveness for not opening our hearts, our souls and our countries to them. I hope it will help Catholics appreciate that this isn't just an economic and legal issue, but a moral issue and a matter of faith. It's about the essence of Christianity.

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