

The church should side with dedicated immigrants

Fr. Peter Daly | Sep. 9, 2013 Parish Diary

The young man on the bicycle stopped beside me at the traffic light. He was wearing the uniform of a local fast-food outlet. I had seen him before at our Spanish Mass. He was from Guatemala. He was a relatively recent arrival.

I waved at him. He saw my clerical collar and waved back. He recognized me from church. When the light changed, he pushed off, headed, I assumed, toward his work. I think he is dishwasher. He probably works for minimum wage. Almost certainly he has no benefits.

He shares an apartment with three other young men. None of them drives a car, to my knowledge. So we see them walking or bicycling along the roads in our area. I know he has a family back home in Guatemala: parents, brothers and sisters. He sends the lion's share of his income back to his family in Central America. Sometimes, I see these young men at the Western Union counter at the supermarket or in the bank, wiring the money home.

I don't know their immigration status, but I assume they are probably without papers, "undocumented." Their story is like hundreds of thousands of other people who have risked life and limb to come here to work. They are often the main support of an extended family back home.

As the young man rode away, I found myself filled with admiration for him.

He is humble. He asks nothing of anyone except a chance to work. He lives thousands of miles from home in cultural isolation. Our community has very few Latinos. Somehow, he still finds time to pray, which is more than I can say for many of our own young people. He comes to Mass by himself. He sits alone in prayer. He endures my bad Spanish as I stumble through the liturgy. As far as I know, he has not been in trouble with the law.

He is the sort of immigrant who has made this country strong.

The church should be at his side.

I would like to think that if I was in his position, I would have the guts and the strength to do what he has done. No doubt his relatives at home in Guatemala are desperately poor. He has probably crossed deserts, climbed mountains, swum rivers, hopped trains, learned a new language, and risked his life and liberty to just to work in a fast-food outlet. He did all of that to help his family. He has broken our country's laws, but I think he is obeying God's law by providing for his family.

I have seen the kind of home that he probably comes from in Central America.

Every six months, we send a delegation to our sister parish in Nicaragua to check on the progress of our housing project there. So far, we have built 150 houses and an old folks' home. Each house costs about \$2,500, no electricity or plumbing. The families there must have their own land. The families there must help in the

construction of their home. It is not a handout, but a hand up.

We not only bless the new houses, but we also visit the "before" houses, which are horrible. In the United States, we would not even use such places for a chicken coop. They are little more than sticks and mud, covered with sheets of plastic. They have dirt floors. When the rains come, they get soaked. The young man in Maryland probably lived in a house like that back home in Guatemala.

Last time I was in Nicaragua, I met a young man who is a sort of "spiritual cousin" to the guy on the bicycle in Maryland. He was a *campesino*, a field worker. He works in the sun for \$1 to \$2 per day.

He asked us for a ride into town, about 12 miles. Ordinarily, he would walk. As he climbed up into our rented SUV, he paused for a second. "Why is it so cool in here?" he asked. He had never been in an air-conditioned vehicle. Buses in Nicaragua are not air-conditioned. If he got a ride into town, it would probably be on the back of a pickup truck.

As we rode into town, we got to talking. The young man had ambition. He wanted to be more than a field worker. He was going into town to attend weekend school, studying to be a *contador*, an accountant. Each day after working in the field, he studies while there is still sunlight, for an hour or so. They have no electric lights in his little village.

On Friday nights, he goes into town. There he stays overnight, sleeping on the floor of a relative's house. Early Saturday morning, he takes a bus to the city, where he goes to school all day. On Saturday night, he retraces his steps to the relative's house. Then on Sunday mornings, after Mass, he walks the 12 miles back to his village.

I asked him where he would work when he finishes school. "Don't know," he said. Then he added, "What I would really like is to go to the U.S. and work in a store."

One of our parishioners in the SUV was listening to all this conversation. He is a very successful businessman in the United States. As the boy got out of our SUV, my parishioner said, "You know, that's the kind of kid we would really want in the U.S. I would hire a kid with that much ambition."

The man on the bicycle in Maryland and the boy in Nicaragua are two sides of the immigrant story. I must say, I admire them both.

[Fr. Peter Daly is a priest in the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and has been pastor of St. John Vianney parish in Prince Frederick, Md., since 1994.]

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