NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Solidarity and hospitality are the Catholic response to plight of refugee children

Zachary R. Dehm | Jul. 24, 2014 Young Voices

Leaders of the Catholic church in the United States and abroad say the plight of refugee children crossing the Southwestern border should encourage a response grounded in solidarity and hospitality. They implore us to help these children out of a Christian obligation toward those in need of our support. For such efforts to succeed, we must move beyond political banter, consider new perspectives and adopt a more charitable approach.

This is not intended as a liberal argument. It is arguably not even a political one. As our church leaders have emphasized, it is simply a Catholic argument. It is an argument worth reiterating over and over until it results in a change in approach to the crisis, which requires a consideration of alternative perspectives.

A recent column in [1]*The Boston Globe* [1] by Yvonne Abraham illustrates the experience of children making the journey through Mexico to the U.S. Often, they travel without their family and in spite of the threat of violence. Why would mothers send their children north? Abraham asks. She finds the only sensible conclusion: risking their child's life to migrate through Mexico is an unfortunate imperative when staying presents a greater threat than leaving.

Too often, this perspective is ignored or gets lost in political and economic discourse. Pope Francis emphasizes [2] that building a just world requires a policy and an approach that inform people of the plight of these children. Moving beyond a perspective focused solely on the cost of U.S. social services and economic effect would facilitate these changes. Otherwise, some individuals will remain stuck under the impression that refugees come to the U.S. motivated by the prospect of luxuries and jobs without the burden of taxes. These people see envy as the only possible motivation. A perspective that accounts for the mother's imperative could push the conversation closer to what Pope Francis has called us to consider.

Certainly, these refugees would much rather not abandon their homes for a foreign land where they know they are likely to face our rejection. However, their situation at home leaves no room for that proposition.

There are a number of reasons to leave one's home, and those are received with different responses from the destination community. My mother, a Filipino immigrant, entered the U.S. without much difficulty as the child of a physician. Although certainly she struggled with the adjustment to a new home, she did not face the same kind of harsh realities these refugee children face. She did not travel through one of the world's most dangerous corridors to get to the U.S. She was not escaping the imminent danger that would necessitate a mother to send her child fleeing. She did not arrive in the U.S. to a response of rejection and alienation. Perhaps the only major thing she has in common with these children is the hope of a better life.

Like my mother, these children and their parents see, in some regard, a better world in the U.S. Unlike my mother, these children seek not the numerous privileges that accompany U.S. citizenship, but simply a world where they are less likely to face the daily threat of violence. They seek to escape the dangers of gang activity and other elements that stifle what remains of the faint hope and prosperity in their home country.

Both my mother and these children left for a world unknown and, perhaps, idealized. My mother came because of the privilege of being a doctor's daughter in the U.S. The refugee children come not out of upward mobility, but desperation.

While I can only reiterate what I have learned of the young refugees' struggles, I can illustrate how we ought to respond. According to Pope Francis, the California Catholic Conference [3] and other church leaders, the pastoral and loving approach on which our Catholic faith insists must be a part of our response. We should respond as a Christian community in accord with what the church teaches about the dignity of the refugee and in a way appropriate to their struggle and need. This sort of response is what ought to be highlighted instead of the turning around of a bus [4].

Many will disregard the church's pleas because they interpret it as an "open-door" political policy on immigration. However, the true problem at hand is not a political one. It is not about opening the gates in our wall of separation; rather, it is about an imperative derived from being a part of the human community. The plight of the refugees gets tied up with the immigration debate, and the discussion about the humanitarian crisis at hand gets lost. The language about the lives of the children becomes muted. Discussion of the immigration question should accompany a greater, more important conversation of the humanitarian crisis, not the other way around. First and foremost, we have a moral obligation to help those we can, and our Catholic faith calls us to act and to sacrifice accordingly.

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[1] http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/07/19/migrant-child-flees-salvador-gangs-alone-seeking-join-her-family/WVenpPwO7eF3PY1pLwIbLL/story.html?p1=Article_FeatureStrip
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