

# 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – November 3&4, 2018 – Reflection: “Welcoming the Refugee and the Migrant” – Part One

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“Which is the first of all the commandments,’ Jesus was asked. And He replied, ‘The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Back in the 1930's when our country and much of the world was in the grip of the Great and horrible Depression, a new American president came into the living rooms of farms and tenements where people were frightened of losing everything and spoke to them across the radio waves: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!” Fear of the stranger and the desire to protect one's own family, one's own tribe from the unknown are deeply ingrained in all human behavior. But fear is not all we have within us as a species. From time immemorial, people have also demonstrated the ability to extend hospitality and protection to those who are in need: the displaced, the homeless, the frightened.

The Catholic Church, whatever her faults have been down through the ages, has been a consistent voice raised in support of migrants and refugees, offering sanctuary in her churches and institutions, and calling upon the faithful to welcome and protect the stranger.

What is the foundation for this stance of the Church? It is to be found in the holy word of God, the Bible. In *Genesis*, God calls on Abraham, our father in faith, and the father of Jews and Muslims too, to abandon his home and migrate to a new land. Later, Jacob and the Israelites follow Joseph to Egypt, migrants escaping a famine in their own land. In the Book of *Exodus*, the tribes of Israel flee cruel slavery in Egypt and wander in the Arabian desert for 40 years, refugees in search of a promised land. And to this day, when Jewish families gather for shabat supper on Friday evenings, an extra place is set for the stranger, the guest, for the Law in the Book of *Leviticus* is clear and uncompromising: "When an alien resides with you in the your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt."

Even the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fled Israel to escape the murderous designs of a maniacal king who wanted to kill the Baby he feared would take his throne ... they too were refugees, strangers in a strange land. Likewise, the Church of Jesus Christ has always seen herself as a "Pilgrim People" who along the way would take along the stranger just as Jesus welcomed the sinner, embraced the outcast and the leper, extolled the charity of the Samaritan: "For I was hungry and you gave me food ... a stranger and you welcomed me ..." His followers came to understand that they were to see the face of Christ in the other, as St. Paul so powerfully reminds: "that there is neither Jew nor Greek, free or slave, male or female, all are made in the image of God, all possess equal dignity ... God shows no partiality."

In the past 200 years, there has been tremendous displacement and movement of peoples. The whole history of our country from its first

days has been growth through migration. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries they came from all over Europe seeking a better life for themselves and their children. Today we are seeing refugees and migrants from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and our southern neighbors in the Americas.

St. Brigid Parish, named for a legendary Irish saint, was founded by Irish immigrants fleeing horrible conditions on the Emerald Isle. From 1845-1850, starvation and disease claimed around 1 million Irish lives. The Great Famine as it was called came as a result of a blight that rotted the potato crop and left the poor starving. There was plenty of good food that could have fed the whole island but it was exported by the exploiters of the Irish and thousands upon thousands of peasant children, women, elders, and men died of hunger and horrible sickness while the British Empire and the world didn't give a care. In that time more than 2 million Irish souls left their cursed island and sailed for America. Those who survived the rough passage in stinking holds of leaky ships received a rough welcome in their new home, but none worse than here in Boston. Proper Yankee Bostonians pointed and laughed at the rag-wearing Irish, housed them in 9X11 rooms with no running water, no light, no ventilation; damp, stinking tenements on the waterfront that became breeding grounds for cholera. 60% of the children born to the Irish in Boston didn't live to see their sixth birthday, and the Irish adults could expect to live no more than 6 years after they got off the boats.

Bostonians feared the Irish would take their jobs and destroy their culture with their crime, their ignorance, and their Papist, superstitious religion. Signs appeared in shop windows, on factory gates, on workshop doors: "No Irish Need Apply". Their Catholic

churches could never be built on the town commons of New England, but out of sight, out of the way. The Irish were stinking vermin and would destroy all that was good in America. Amazing then, that barely 60 years later, the "Happy Warrior", the Catholic Governor of New York, Al Smith, would run for president. And then, 40 years after that, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, United States Senator from Massachusetts, the son of wealth, the grandson and great grandson of dirt-poor Irish immigrants, would stand on a bitter cold January morning on the steps of the United States Capitol, and place his hand on his family's Catholic Bible and before millions of his fellow Americans, take the oath of office as the President of the United States of America.

The refugee, the migrant, the immigrant, the alien, the invader then stepped into the pulpit as his voiced boomed into the microphone and he challenged the nation, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!"

In that spirit, we Christians, we Americans, might rightly ask: not what the people of the world can do for us, but what we can do for the poor, the tired, the huddled masses who come to us longing to be free.

To Be Continued ...