



Dying to Live: Theology, Migration, and the Human Journey

By Daniel G. Groody, CSC

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A few years ago I was working in Mexico at a border outreach center that offered material and pastoral support to those on the move. Some were traveling northwards in search of better lives, and others had tried to enter the U.S. but failed and were deported back to Mexico.¹

One day a group of forty immigrants arrived in the center, sojourners who had hoped to reach the U.S. It had been a long night for them – and an even longer week. For three days they had crossed through the Arizona desert in temperatures that reach 120 degrees in the shade. Amid the challenges of the desert terrain – their personal vulnerability to everything from heat stroke to poisonous snakes – they had braved a perilous journey and tried to make their way to the U.S., often under the cover of darkness. They walked remote and diffuse trails that have taken the lives of thousands of immigrants –an estimated 300-500 annually since 1994.

Why were they willing to take such risks and leave their home country? When I asked them, some said they had relatives back home who needed medication they could not afford. Others said the \$3-\$5 a day they earned for a twelve-hour work day in Mexico was not enough to put much more than beans and tortillas on the table. Still others said potato chips had become a luxury they could no longer afford, and they could not stand to look their children in the eyes when they complained of hunger.

The Desert Ordeal

"We are migrating not because we want to but because we have to," said Mario. "My family at home depends on me. I'm already dead in Mexico, and getting to the U.S. gives us the hope of living, even though I may die."

But now they were back on the border after a week-long ordeal. While walking through the Arizona desert, they had suddenly heard a rumbling sound on the horizon. Then a white laser-like light cut their world in two. Within moments a border patrol helicopter surrounded them and threw the group into chaos.

“So they circled around us and then rounded us up like we were cattle,” said Maria. “I said, no, dear God ... I’ve gone through so much sacrifice to come this far ... please don’t let them send us back where we came from.”

“It was an awful night,” added Gustavo. “But the worst part was when they started playing the song, ‘La Cucaracha’ over the helicopter intercom. I never felt so humiliated in my life, like I was the lowest form of life of earth, like I wasn’t even a human being.”

The story of Mario, Maria and Gustavo gives witness to their particular journey across the U.S.-Mexico border, but its dynamics are universal in scope. Today there are more than 200 million people migrating around the world, or one out of every thirty-five people on the planet, which is equivalent to the population of Brazil. Some 30-40 million of these are undocumented, 24 million are internally displaced and about 10 million are refugees.² For many reasons some scholars refer to these days as the “age of migration,” touching every area of human life.² The immigration issue underscores not only conflict at geographical borders but the turbulent crossroads between national security and human insecurity, national sovereign rights and human rights, civil law and natural law, and citizenship and discipleship.³

Amid these contentious debates, much has been written about the social, political, economic, cultural dimensions of immigration. But surprisingly very little has been written from a theological perspective, even less from the vantage point of the immigrants themselves. Yet the theme of migration is as old as the Scriptures. From the call of Abraham to the Exodus from Egypt, from Israel’s wandering in the desert to their experience of exile, from the holy family’s flight into Egypt to the missionary activity of the Church, the very identity of the People of God is inextricably intertwined with stories of movement, risk and hospitality.

Broken Borders: God’s Migration

But what exactly can theology offer to this complex issue of immigration? Here I will highlight three Christian themes that touch directly on the migration debate and help us understand that crossing borders is at the heart of human life, divine revelation and Christian identity. These three areas are the *Imago Dei* (the Image of God), the *Verbum Dei* (the Word of God) and the *Missio Dei* (the Mission of God).⁴

The notion of the *Imago Dei* emerges in the earliest pages of Scripture. We read in the first creation account that human beings are created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). No text is more foundational or more significant in its implication for the immigration debate. It reveals that immigration is not just about a political “problem” but about real people. The *Imago Dei* is the core symbol of human dignity, the infinite worth of every human being, and the divine attributes that are part of every human life, including will, memory, emotions, understanding, and the capacity to love and enter into relationship with others.

Listening to stories of immigrants along the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as the borders between Slovakia-Ukraine, Malta-Libya, and others, I have discovered that a common denominator around the world among all who migrate is their experience of dehumanization.

I recently was speaking with a group of refugees in the Spanish-occupied territory of Ceuta on the Moroccan coast. They took me up to the mountains to meet some people from India, who were hiding out in cardboard shacks in the mountains.

The only place available to them was a small plot of land, where they built a cardboard shack, located above an animal shelter that had hundreds of dogs, which barked all through the night. "Even many of the animals here live better than we do here," said one refugee, part of a group from India that was seeking work in the European Union. "It is as if we are worth nothing to the people who live here, and if we die, it won't matter."

The insults they endure are not just a direct assault on their pride but on their very existence. Their vulnerability and sense of meaninglessness weigh heavily on them; they often feel that the most difficult part of being an immigrant is to be no one to anyone. The Imago Dei brings to the forefront the human costs embedded in the immigration equation, and it challenges a society more oriented towards profit than people to accept that the economy should be made for people and not people for the economy. It is a reminder that the moral health of an economy is measured by how well the most vulnerable are faring. The Imago Dei insists that we see immigrants not as problems to be solved but people to be healed and empowered.

Crossing Borders: Jesus the Refugee

The second theological notion that is central to the immigration debate is the Verbum Dei. It declares that God in Jesus crosses the divide that exists between divine life and human life. In the incarnation God migrates to the human race and, as Karl Barth notes, makes his way into the "far country."⁵ ⁶ This far country is one of human discord and disorder, a place of division and dissension, a territory marked by death and the demeaning treatment of human beings.

The Gospel of Matthew says God in Jesus not only takes on human flesh and migrates into our world but actually becomes a refugee himself when he and his family flee political persecution and escape into Egypt (Matt 2:13-15). The divine takes on not just any human narrative but that of the most vulnerable among us. This movement toward the human race takes place not on the strength of any human initiative or human accomplishment but through divine gratuity. Walking the way of the cross, overcoming the forces of death that threaten human life, Jesus gives hope to all who go through the agony of economic injustice, family separation, cultural uprootedness, and even a premature and painful death. Certainly migrants who cross the deserts in search of more dignified lives see in the Jesus story their own story: he opens up a reason to hope despite the most hopeless of circumstances. What impresses me most in speaking to migrants in the midst of their arduous journey is their ability to believe in God even in the most godless of situations. They speak about trusting in God even after all has been taken away, and they affirm God's goodness even when their lot has been marked by such suffering and pain.

Beyond Borders: Civilization of Love

A third notion from theology that gives us a different way of understanding immigration is the *Missio Dei*. The mission of the Church is to proclaim a God of life and make our world more human by building up, in Pope Paul VI's words, the "civilization of love." In imitation of Jesus, it seeks to make real the practice of table fellowship. The significance of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and social outcasts is that he crosses over the human borders that divide one human being from another.

If the incarnation is about God crossing over the divine-human divide, the mission of the Church is to cross the human-human divide. It is fundamentally a mission of reconciliation, a realization that the borders that define countries may have some proximate value but are not ultimately those that define the body of Christ.

One of the most remarkable ritual expressions of this unity takes place each year near El Paso, Texas. In the dry, rugged, sun-scorched terrain where many immigrants lose their lives, bishops, priests, and lay people come together annually to celebrate the Eucharist. Like at other liturgies, they pray and worship together. Unlike other liturgies, a sixteen-foot high iron fence divides this community in half, with one side in Mexico and the other in the U.S. Amid a desert of death and a culture of fear, this Eucharist is not just a tool for activism or social reform but a testimony of God's universal, undivided, and unrestricted love for all people. It speaks of the gift and challenge of Christian faith and the call to feed the world's hunger for peace, justice and reconciliation. In uniting people beyond the political constructions that divide us, it gives tangible expression to the moral demands of the Kingdom of God, the ethical possibilities of global solidarity, and the Christian vision of a journey of hope.

Immigration is arguably the most challenging issue of the new century, but this need not blind us to the core issues that lay at the heart of every one of us. How we respond to those most in need says more about who we are individually and collectively than it does about those on the move. Theology supplies a way of thinking about migration that keeps the human issues at the center of the debate and reminds us that our own existence as a pilgrim people is migratory in nature.

My primary purpose here is not to make a case for or against open borders but to give a new way of conceptualizing a difficult and contentious global issue. It seeks to broaden the intellectual terrain about migration and forge the beginnings of some theological foundations for such a perspective. Viewed as a theological concept, migration offers a rich hermeneutic for some of the most foundational dimensions of human existence and offers a different vantage point for making moral choices; it illuminates the gift and demand of Christian faith in light of the pressing social problems of the modern world, and it opens up a space to bring out what is most human in a debate that often diminishes and dehumanizes those forcibly displaced.

Although some argue that combining theology and migration mixes politics with religion, and others that migration falls more to the domain of social science than theological reflection, migration touches so many aspects of life and society that it cannot be hermetically compartmentalized. Academic reflection requires its own transborder discourse to understand the complex phenomenon of global migration and its multidimensional implications. A theology of migration not only dialogues with other disciplines but integrates their findings into the overall task of faith seeking understanding

in the modern world. Moreover, social science and theology need each other in this difficult debate. Social science without theology does not give us a perspective wide enough to account for the deeper relational and spiritual dimensions of human life that shape, define, and sustain human existence—a fact that becomes more evident especially amidst crisis and trial. Theology without social science leaves us less equipped to read the signs of the times, engage contemporary issues, or speak to the pressing questions that affect large portions of the world.

Theology offers not just more information but a new imagination, one that reflects at its core what it means to be human before God and to live together in community. In seeking to overcome all that divides us in order to reconcile us in all our relationships, Christian discipleship reminds us that the more difficult walls to cross are the ones that exist in the hearts of each of us. Unable to cross this divide by ourselves, Christian faith rests ultimately in the one who migrated from heaven to earth, and through his death and resurrection, passed over from death to life.

The question, then, is not whether to allow or restrict migration but whether our moral choices are creating divides which move us toward a globalization of polarity rather than toward a globalization of solidarity. In David Hollenbach's words, "The needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich. The freedom of the dominated takes priority over the liberty of the powerful. The participation of marginalized groups takes priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them." Ignoring those in pain and building of walls of separation alienates people not only from each other but also from themselves. A theology of migration seeks to understand what it means to take on the mind and heart of Christ in light of the plight of today's migrant's and refugees. To limit compassion to the borders of one's nationality, one's family, or even one's self is a migration toward disintegration. For those on a trajectory toward disintegration, a theology of migration cannot make sense, since it will always be news from a foreign land. "If I see a person or persons suffer," notes Elie Wiesel, "and the distance between us does not shrink . . . then, my place is not good, not enviable." If the term "alien" is to be used at all, it would be descriptive not of those who lack political documentation but of those who have so disconnected themselves from God and others that they are incapable of seeing in the vulnerable stranger a mirror of themselves, a reflection of Christ, and an invitation to human solidarity.

¹ This article is drawn in part from two previously published pieces, Daniel G. Groody, "Dying to Live: Migration, Theology and the Human Journey," *Reflections*, Yale University, Fall 2008, and Daniel G. Groody, "Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees," *Theological Studies* (September 2009). 638-667.

² For more on these statistics, see the website for the International Organization for Migration, [http:// www.iom.int/jahia/jahia/pid/254](http://www.iom.int/jahia/jahia/pid/254).

³ Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age Of Migration: International Population Movements In The Modern World* (London: The Guilford Press, 2003).

⁴ Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008)

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, "The Doctrine of Reconciliation," trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark International, 1956/2004), 157-210.