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## **Envisioning Gospel-Based Solidarity and Flourishing with Migrants**

From March 16–18, 2020, a national gathering of Catholic religious justice and peace leaders, organized by the U.S. Conference of Major Superiors of Men, met to develop collaborative responses and strategies to the emergency on the US – Mexico border, as well as the crisis of immigrants and their families throughout the United States. The meeting, originally scheduled to be held in Las Cruces, NM, was held online. We gathered with our hearts reaching out in prayers to God for our brothers and sisters affected by COVID-19 and in solidarity with medical workers who are at the front line giving medical assistance to those who are sick.

We affirmed the common humanity we share with migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, and expressed a desire to strengthen our solidarity with them, in order to build a stronger nonviolent movement within the Catholic Church to challenge inhumane and unjust immigration and border policies. And we looked at how racism, economic injustice, climate change, militarization and migration are all interconnected, just as we as a human family are connected to our migrant sisters and brothers. An intersectional lens helps us to see how these issues not only exacerbate each other, especially forced migration, but how getting to the root causes of forced migration requires us to address each of these issues together.

We acknowledged the intimate connection between racism toward immigrants and forced migration. This is an old story, rooted in centuries of oppression against native peoples, but its impacts are as cruel as ever, based on policies that criminalize immigrants and militarize borders. During the current administration we have seen the devastating impact of cruel and inhumane policies that deny immigrants the right to asylum, detain and separate families, traumatize children, as well as effectively seal the border denying entry to most immigrants. The courts have often pushed back on federal policies leading to a huge increase in state level anti-immigrant legislation focused on enforcement.

### **What do we Envision?**

First, *we must look at the root causes of migration, including the consequences of U.S. policies in Central America and Mexico that have contributed to growing inequality, climate change, corruption and violence.* A model of development based on extractive industries that enrich corporate elites, destroys the lands and the waters, denies indigenous and peasant communities their rights, and threatens them with violence is forcibly displacing people who have no other alternative to survive and protect themselves and their families but to migrate. We must also insist on flexibility regarding future migrant flows to ensure that we protect human dignity and family unity.

Second, *we need to replace a model of development that primarily enriches a corporate elite and increases poverty and food insecurity of the majority who are poor.* We heard from both academic experts as well as migrant families how economic injustice is driving forced migration. Though these injustices have deep roots, the impact of free trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA have created mechanisms for the free exchange of capital and goods, but not people. These agreements have primarily favored foreign investment and enriched corporations rather than benefiting most people, further creating inequality and driving migration.

Third, *we need to address the impact of environmental destruction and climate change in Central America and Mexico,* which is an increasing factor in the reason why people are forced to migrate. We heard environmental experts in Central America describe how hurricanes, droughts and changing weather patterns

have disproportionately impacted poor communities, increasing food insecurity. We heard how extractive industries have ravaged the environment and denied indigenous communities their rights to care for and protect their native lands and waters. Adverse climatic conditions have altered entire ecosystems, leading to less agricultural production and forced migration. We heard, too, how the building of the wall on the US – Mexico border has disturbed ecological systems and migration patterns of native animal species.

Fourth, *we need to end the military violence that both forces people to migrate and then prevents them from escaping violence by militarizing the borders of southern Mexico and the United States.* We heard how militarization has a long history in Central America and Mexico, and how it is deeply connected to both the structural violence of an economic model that oppresses the poor majority and extracts natural resources for profits, and cultural violence based on racism that marginalizes the rights and participation of poor and indigenous communities. We observed how militarization contributes to forced migration, to migrant deaths from a deterrence strategy, and to deporting people back to the very violence they fled. A case in point, the U.S. School of the Americas (WHINSEC) trains military and police who have too often participated in significant human rights violations in Central America and Mexico, and also trains Customs and Border Patrol and ICE agents too often implicated in creating terror in immigrant communities in the U.S., especially in sanctuary cities.

### **Action Steps: Realizing a Vision of Gospel-based Solidarity and Flourishing with Migrants**

We affirmed the ways that Catholic communities and ministries are already providing accompaniment and solidarity to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, both at the US – Mexico border as well as throughout the country. This accompaniment includes direct service and hospitality, visits to detention centers and legal services, pastoral and sacramental support, as well as direct advocacy and public witness to challenge cruel and unjust immigration policies. Our solidarity is rooted in our Catholic faith and witness, beginning with the call to welcome our migrant sister or brother, knowing that when we do so we welcome Christ (Mt 25:31-46).

As one participant noted, “For us, it was as simple as a knock on the door,” referring to the migrants on his doorstep. “We had to ask ourselves, ‘What are we morally obligated to do?’ ‘What does the Gospel require of us?’” And when we opened the door, we recognized the great gift of hospitality was that these migrant families, whom we invited into our community, were really the ones who invited us into their lives. That was the beginning of a more radical and prophetic response that we took as a Catholic religious community. In that spirit, we conclude with what we can do, when we hear the knock on the door.

First, *we are invited to take faithful and strategic risks for systemic change to welcome our migrant sisters and brothers.* The times call for a bold and imaginative response. Such risk-taking is not only about discomfort, but also may entail the risk of social status, resources, political access, religious position, and even for some our earthly life. We must protect the human dignity and the human rights of migrants and their families, even with physical accompaniment. They have a right to asylum, and a right to be safe. Unjust laws, which prevent such rights, have no binding in conscience and we may have a responsibility to disobey them (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1903). We imagine and seek a Catholic sanctuary network.

Second, *we need to accompany immigrant communities and organizers already in our midst.* They are the ones most impacted and taking the risks, they are the ones leading the way. We need to listen and build power. By our solidarity and accompaniment of migrants and their families, we offer them hope, and receive hope in return.

Third, *we need to listen and speak to the dreams and aspirations of young people, as well as to honor and trust lay leadership.* They are looking to be inspired, they are aware of who has a voice at the table and who has been rendered invisible or dismissed, and they are moved by bold and prophetic witnessing. We see social justice and solidarity with migrants as an essential element in both faith formation and religious vocations.

Fourth, *we need to educate our communities to better challenge and reform the myths and stereotypes about the migrant and refugee community.* This begins by listening deeply to migrant stories and personal histories. For example, immigrants are not in our presence to take jobs and resources from us. They are not invaders. They are fleeing for their lives. We are enriched by their presence, and with the spiritual and cultural values they bring.

Fifth, *we must encourage the political will for a new way forward.* The creation of a bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform system based on dignity and human rights is essential.

Finally, *we need to preach the just Word and boldly proclaim the full Gospel, addressing the challenging issues of our time.* What gives us courage to do so? The courage, passion and joy we encounter in migrants and their families, even amid great challenges. They invite us into a sacred space of accompaniment and solidarity with vulnerable communities, and that gives us hope.

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