

God's Protection of Immigrants: A Personal Reflection from a Hispanic Pastoral Perspective

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Immigration is not new. Nevertheless, when we are part of an immigrant group, immigration takes on added significance. I am an immigrant and so am part of what this essay is about. Originally from El Salvador, I immigrated to Los Angeles, California in 1982. Like every other immigrant, I had to face the feeling of being a foreigner. My own personal experience leads me to reflect on God's care and protection from a Hispanic pastoral point of view. My presentation arises from the experience of someone that, day in and day out, faces the challenges of caring for immigrants. I do so as



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their pastor, friend, and, in the case of many young people, as a father figure. Many of them never knew their father because they were victims of abandonment or because their father felt the need to emigrate without them.

Causes of Human Displacement

From the moment they leave their land, immigrants are transformed into foreigners. They must face head on anything that might await them in an unknown land: a different culture, a different society, and perhaps a different religious practice. All these things inherently bring new challenges. All the “newness” can include difficult struggles as well as triumphs. The triumphs are what every immigrant hopes to find.

Economic factors are perhaps the biggest causes of human displacement. This is the case for Oscar,¹ a Salvadoran youth who immigrated to Los Angeles in 1999. He had begun high school in his home country and had a tremendous desire to go to college and have a career. His father worked in construction as a contractor for the government of his city. When the opposition party won the mayoral race in the elections at that time, Oscar's father lost his government contract. Providentially, an aunt who lived in the United States had requested residence for his entire family. It turned out that Oscar, his parents, and his three siblings were able to immigrate legally to Los Angeles.

My wife and I have a similar story. My wife's family experienced displacement due to economic reasons resulting from the civil war that engulfed El Salvador in the 1980s. When her parents could not find work, they were forced to move to Los Angeles. There they encountered a reality quite

¹ Personal interview, August 30, 2007.

different from the middle-class lifestyle they had enjoyed in El Salvador.

A higher economic level brings with it a better social status, something that many immigrants yearn to obtain. In many of our Latin American countries, social status is markedly differentiated. Sadly, we live in societies where “you are only worth what you possess.” Your economic position defines your social status.

José’s story demonstrates the pull of immigration as a way to raise one’s economic and social status. José is a young Honduran who decided to immigrate north in 1998.² His motivations were quite different from those of Oscar or of my wife’s family. José told me that he used to see his friends and neighbors wearing nice clothes or buying new things with money their relatives in the United States sent them. José, however, lived alone. His parents had separated, and José, finding himself abandoned, decided to go north.

Evelyn’s case is intriguing because immigrating allowed her to raise her social status in both her home country and in the United States. Evelyn is a single mother from El Salvador who lives in Los Angeles. She works very hard cleaning homes to support her young daughter. She recently had the opportunity to vacation in her home country, and during her stay she purchased a house. She excitedly told my wife and me about her purchase. Full of joy, she announced that she finally had a home of her own, and that she had decided to buy it in El Salvador because she probably would not be able to purchase a home in Los Angeles.

In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, **civil wars** in Central America caused many to emigrate to the United States, most without legal papers. In the case of Hondurans

² Personal interview, August 30, 2007.

and Guatemalans, for example, very few were able to receive refugee status because their "countries were not experiencing an officially recognized conflict."³ Out of these migration waves, Salvadorans have established themselves primarily in Los Angeles, Houston, Washington, D.C., and to a lesser degree in the states of Florida and Virginia.

One such war-related immigrant is Carlos (not his real name). Carlos emigrated from El Salvador in 1980 due to the civil war. A soldier in the special forces, he had been involved in armed combat that profoundly affected him and caused him to flee in search of a better life. He found new life and peace in Jesus in our congregation. After a few years he returned to his home country and is now serving as a Christian missionary in Central America.

Armed conflicts in their neighborhoods have motivated many entire families to immigrate, because parents desire a peaceful environment for their children to grow up in. **Social instability** has led to a new wave of immigration taking place, but not in just one direction. A current and troubling phenomenon is that delinquents and gang members are being deported from the United States back to their home countries where they are beginning new gangs affiliated with the gangs in the USA.

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When José, the young Honduran man mentioned above, found himself abandoned by his parents, he got involved in gangs. He began his journey up north without a penny to his name. He began his trip hoping to receive handouts along

³ Kenneth G. Davis, "Challenges to the Pastoral Care of Central Americans in the United States," *Apuntes* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 47.

the way. José tells his story of running into many people who, perhaps out of pity for him for being so young, gave him food and shelter.

Each one of these foreigners has to struggle in order to survive. As pastors, we have the opportunity to care for many immigrants, sometimes in our own home, as was the case with Sheila, a young Brazilian woman. Sheila had been living with a pastor's family that befriended her. When they retired, Sheila had nowhere to go and was all alone. She lived with us in our home for a while. Her gratitude is so deep that she considers us to be her parents. Now she is married and has her own home in Tennessee.

Effects of Displacement on People's Emotional Lives

Human displacement, whatever might be the motivating cause, has deep repercussions in people's lives. It affects those who stay in the home country and those who immigrate. The effects can be quite diverse: some will be beneficial, such as the well-being that a good job might provide. Others might be negative, such as emotional pain or a drop in one's self-esteem.

Emotional Damage

Emotional pain affects how people function in society.⁴ Offensive words, mocking, mistreatment, or abuse can all cause emotional damage. Oscar, the young Salvadoran man, describes the rejection and contempt he experienced when he entered high school, even though he had immigrated legally to the United States. Oscar did not have any friends like he had had in El Salvador. So he began hanging around other teenagers who, just like him, had recently arrived and had similar feelings. These young people felt marginalized

⁴ David A. Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions* (Colorado Springs: Life Journey, 2004), 11.

at school, even by other Hispanics, due to their language and their place of origin. José's story also includes sad elements of emotional damage. José was a victim of both verbal and physical abuse while he was an immigrant living in Mexico until he could cross over into the United States.

Immigrants are directly or indirectly subject to mistreatment and abuse. They are attacked directly by people with anti-immigrant sentiments who openly demonstrate contempt through their words and attitudes. Indirect attacks can take place when the media transmit news about criminal actions in which immigrants are involved (whether legal or undocumented). Both José and Oscar agree that hearing these kinds of news stories makes them desire to become even more successful, now that they are Christians, to prove that Hispanics can make a positive difference in society.

Emotional scars can also result from frustrations, unexpected situations like accidents, traumatic experiences, or the death of a loved one. Undocumented immigrants cannot return to their home country when a loved one dies. This immobility can produce a feeling of guilt that can grow into deep emotional depression. For many years I lived this situation. Because I did not have immigration papers, I was unable to attend the funeral of my maternal grandmother whom I had not seen since I had arrived in the United States. Some members of my congregation have risked employment and their relatively "safe" status by traveling to their home country because they so desperately wanted to see their family.

Immigrants are more vulnerable to depression during special holidays like Christmas and Mother's Day. Because they are all alone and far from their family, feelings of "desperation, helplessness, melancholy, despondency, and

deep sadness”⁵ can overwhelm them. Depression can lead to a negative self-image, in addition to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-criticism. For immigrants, these feelings of guilt are very real because they have left their family and other loved ones.⁶

Effects on Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the value, respect, affirmation, and dignity that people have regarding themselves, shaped by how they generally see themselves. Immigrants, due to the simple fact of being in a culture different from their own, frequently have feelings of rejection. They also face the additional difficulty of trying to communicate in a different language. US culture is largely individualistic, emphasizing personal fulfillment. By contrast, Latin American culture is largely based on social communities and is quite affective. These cultural traits can mold the way immigrants value themselves. Unable to comprehend the individualism of US American culture, immigrants can easily feel unimportant, rejected, and consequently, out of place in society.

The elevated social position many Latin American immigrants had in their home countries does not usually carry over to the United States because their academic degrees are not recognized... Consequently, they have to accept jobs lower than their studies and abilities would warrant.

On the other hand, many Latin American immigrants had previously achieved a certain social status in their home countries, often including a college degree. Yet this

⁵ “La depresión,” *Manual de Billy Graham para obreros cristianos* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1984), 71; see also Pablo Hoff, *El pastor como consejero* (Deerfield, FL: Vida, 1981), 196–201; Clyde M. Narramore, *The Psychology of Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 278.

⁶ Seamands, 111–112.

social position does not usually carry over to the United States because their degrees are not recognized in the same way internationally. Consequently, they have to accept jobs lower than their studies and abilities would warrant. This situation definitely affects the way people value themselves. I have personally interacted with medical doctors, lawyers, and architects who have not been able to exercise their professions in the United States. Others have been able to enter related fields but at lower pay. Still others, unable to obtain legal accreditation for their degrees in the United States, have decided to return to their country of origin.

Javier and Marielos are Salvadoran medical doctors whose paths crossed with mine. This couple had a comfortable social and economic status in San Salvador. As doctors they had started a private clinic that provided them with ample income. Nevertheless, their youngest son became sick with a cancerous tumor in his lungs. Based on the recommendations of other doctors and surgeons, the couple decided to move to Los Angeles in search of treatment that was not available in El Salvador. When I met the couple, Javier was working as a janitor in a printing company while Marielos took care of their children. God healed their little son of cancer, but now they had to find a way to make a living. They had overstayed their visas and were without the proper documents to remain in the country. As fellow Christians, we gladly developed a friendship with them. We directed Javier to a Salvadoran association which provides help for university-trained professionals wanting to exercise their profession in the United States. The TPS⁷ program was a great help to Javier and Marielos. A short time later,

⁷ *Temporary Protected Status*, a United States federal government program that granted certain extensions to Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans due to the unstable conditions in their countries.

Javier was working as an X-ray technician at Los Angeles Children's Hospital and Marielos found a position at the El Salvador General Consulate.

Miguel is another young professional whose path overlapped with ours a few years back. Miguel is an architect from Guatemala. He emigrated to Los Angeles searching for a better economic situation, but when he arrived his dreams were frustrated. Through divine providence, a contractor from our church recognized Miguel's talents and took him under his wing. He offered him a job, although it was not in the architecture field.

Effects on Self-Concept

Feeling rejected, immigrants tend to have a low self-image, sometimes to the point of thinking they are good for nothing. This doubt eats away any desire for self-improvement and leads many immigrants to settle for a mediocre existence.

A person's self-concept is how a person defines himself or herself. People's self-concept indicates how much they believe in themselves, their abilities, their significance, and their worth.⁸ An immigrant's self-concept can be negatively affected by the anti-immigrant sentiments of those who communicate that immigrants are not truly part of the society they live in. Feeling rejected, immigrants tend to have a low self-image, sometimes to the point of thinking they are good for

⁸ William G. Bixler writes that it is not totally correct to talk about self-concept in the singular, given that it is a "constellation of perceptions." There are many aspects of being that contribute to one's self-concept, including one's self-esteem, the most common aspect that helps form one's self-concept. "Self-Concept," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, 2nd edition. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 1075–1077.

nothing. This doubt eats away any desire for self-improvement and leads many immigrants to settle for a mediocre existence.

On the other hand, immigrants who seek to improve their economic situation, or who simply try to survive and provide for their family, feel obligated to accept any old job that comes along. Yet when society at large or even the immigrants themselves denigrate the work they do, it negatively affects the way they feel and how they see themselves. It creates a situation of constant and increasing stress. The self-denigration and stress are accentuated even more when the immigrants are undocumented.

The Role of the Church in the Holistic Care of Immigrants

Jesus said that those disciples who are seriously committed to carrying out the mission of God are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). As such, we have the responsibility of shining as lights in the darkness. The good news provides encouragement, hope, and a sense of protection and well-being. God protects immigrants because he always cares for his creation.

From Practice to Reflection

During the time that my wife and I have been pastoring our congregation we have learned to feel the heartbeat of the people. This heartbeat is born out of the reality immigrants live in and the reality they would like to change. For example, José told me that during his trip through Mexico, he had to travel from city to city on a cargo train. He narrated the dangers involved in this kind of trip, not only possible accidents but also assaults and rapes that would befall the travelers.

During his trip José befriended some gang members as a measure of protection from certain dangers. Nevertheless, there were times when he had to venture out alone in the night to jump aboard a train in the mountains. He told me about how once he had to jump from a hill onto a moving train. Without a doubt, José says, God protected him from death. God protected him again when he crossed the border and hid in some bushes. He prayed that God would close the eyes of the border patrol.

I also see the hand of God on Oscar, in that at the last possible moment he received his legal residence to immigrate, and, therefore, he did not have to suffer like some others. Today Oscar is a graduate of the University of California (Northridge) with a degree in psychology. Neither can I deny the good hand of God on Javier and Marielos who have immersed themselves thoroughly in US American society, not to mention their son's good health in response to their prayer of faith.

Reflecting on these situations, I cannot stop thinking about Elijah's prayer for God to blind the Aramean army (2 Kings 6:18). I also cannot forget the story of the Egyptian army that was thrown into confusion by God so that they could not attack the Israelites (Exodus 14:23–26). I also remember how God blesses those who pray fervently. God understands immigrants, because Jesus was an immigrant in Egypt, and his earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, were also protected by being warned of the plot to kill their son (Matthew 2:13–15).

I see God working on behalf of those who call out for his help. This realization has changed how I proclaim the gospel. The message of salvation is still the same: salvation for those who call upon the Lord, so that no one will be ashamed (Romans 10:13).

Yet my presentation of the gospel is becoming more of a practical application of the Word in the lives of the people rather than a doctrinal-theological exposition.⁹ This means that I preach messages that raise people's self-esteem by showing them their worth in the eyes of God as demonstrated in Scripture (Isaiah 43:4). Through Biblical principles we help them in the formation of a healthy self-concept by guiding them to seek healing in their inner self. More specifically, we help them heal the emotional scars that have remained as a result of the various factors that motivated them to emigrate. We try to achieve this through spiritual retreats where we concentrate on knowing God as our healer. Once we have peace with God, ourselves, and the people who have affected our lives, we can have a better understanding of God's purpose for us here on earth.

Extending Hospitality

Hospitality is receiving someone or taking someone in due to love or courtesy. The Bible is clear about not neglecting hospitality (see Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:13).



⁹ Doctrinal formation of my church members takes place in courses on discipleship and Christian formation. When I mention practical messages, I am referring to the sermons I preach in the public services of the church.

How do we become instruments that God can use to care for immigrants? By fulfilling the great commandments: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29–31). The maximum proof of an authentic faith is love for one's neighbor (James 2:8–9).

According to Jesus, a neighbor is someone who is different from me, the foreigner or the stranger. Although he or she is different, the neighbor is not of less worth. Jesus understood this reality because he himself was an immigrant, "being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7). As an immigrant Jesus experienced rejection by his own people (Matthew 13:53–57). Nevertheless, he did not reject those who were considered foreigners (John 4:9–10).

The Pauline concept of the church as the body of Christ should also be applied here: "So in Christ we who are many form one body" (Romans 12:5). And within this body we take care of each other and bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). We must not forget the Pauline vision of the church as the family of God (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19). We have experienced this family dimension of the church through our use of small groups. These diverse groups have one common denominator: they provide genuine fellowship. In these home groups we really are the family of God. Here we can provide fellowship, friendship, and the human warmth like that of the family the immigrant left behind.

The concept of the church as family goes much further than merely calling each other brother or sister. We practice being family by the shelter and protection we offer in the cell groups that make up our congregation. While the principal objective of these groups is evangelization, true fellowship is a direct result. At the same time our strategy is to shower

love on and identify ourselves with those who, like us, are immigrants and foreigners. Therefore, through these groups, we become a large family. Each group, whether men, women, or youth, offers support and mutual encouragement in times of need. We teach the leaders of our groups to foster a deep sense of belonging. In this way recently arrived immigrants find in our congregation a sense of family, that is, a place where they belong. In addition, we concentrate on the entire family: men, women, youth, and children. We can thus help restore broken relationships, heal the emotional wounds, and, especially for the youth, offer the opportunity to find God's purpose for their lives in this country.

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A Contextualized Pastoral Ministry

Given the fact that we ourselves are immigrants, we understand the circumstances of those who emigrate. Therefore, my wife and I have decided to shepherd our congregation in such a way that we forge and shape the character of each person. We concentrate on working with first-generation immigrants and their families. Children in these families need to find the way to truly become a part of their new society. That is why we emphasize reaching youth and showing them new lifestyles. In the New Testament, Jesus expresses God's desire for the well-being of all people. He came to bring us life in abundance (John 10:10), a life with a markedly different quality. Our objective is for all people to obtain this higher quality of life.

Just as the nation of Israel left Egypt in search of the Promised Land, we teach immigrants that the Promised Land is the different quality of life that is found in Jesus

Christ. Many have come to the United States believing that this country is the land of abundance and prosperity where milk and honey flow. Nevertheless, the reality of immigration is quite different from the idealized vision they had when they left their country of origin. We teach them that they can achieve a lifestyle that is truly abundant and prosperous. Our understanding of prosperity is to fully enjoy the blessings of God in our lives, including good emotional and physical health, including the fruits of our labor.

How do we achieve our objective? We do so through prophetic messages, that is, messages that exhort, build up, and comfort our listeners (1 Corinthians 14:2). This kind

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of message leads people toward a higher quality of life. It is not the kind of message that provokes within immigrants feelings of jealousy, revenge, or retribution, but rather it is the kind that raises their self-esteem and encourages them to participate in God's work. We teach them that living in a new country is not that different from the life of the patriarchs, or many biblical figures who were forced to emigrate to other countries. We point out that they have God's protection, and, above everything else, we offer them hope. This hope is not based on human politics but is grounded in the values of God's Reign, which is already here though not yet in all its fullness.

We strive to completely identify with our people by offering genuine friendship and by opening our home for social gatherings in which everyone feels loved, embraced, accepted, and part of the family. We have clearly seen this sense of family grow in people like Oscar and José. Both agree

that the messages that were preached touched their lives, raised their spirits to face the challenges of living within this country, and motivated them to dream of becoming successful immigrants. They began to understand the purposes of God who called them to leave their homeland and family. They agree that they have found in the church the friendship, love, and support of a true family.

In our church, we have also developed a different way of experiencing certain holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's Eve. These holidays are opportunities for the church to be the family of God, offering the human warmth that the biological family cannot provide due to geographical separation. We offer Christmas, which is a time for the family to celebrate, as a gift to our entire congregation. We share our home to youth who do not have anyone to celebrate with. New Year's Eve is also a unique *fiesta*. We gather for a special worship service before midnight. Then we usher in the New Year with hugs all around. Especially during the times of traditional *fiestas*, the immigrant needs the warmth of a human family. This is when the church can become the arms that embrace the one who needs love; the feet that go to the one who is lonely; the eyes to truly see the conditions people live in; and the heart to share the love and affection that is so desperately needed. After all is said and done, we are the body of Christ.

Conclusion

In light of our experiences, we know quite well that God takes care of immigrants, whether they recognize him as Lord or not (Proverbs 15:3). We see his care in the lives of people in the Bible and in our own times. Our history is the history of Jesus, who was an immigrant among human beings, a foreigner in his own land, rejected by some

but gladly received by others. We are encouraged by his promise that we are citizens, not of this earth, but of heaven. Therefore, we live as foreigners and pilgrims under the care and protection of God, assured of his purposes for us:

I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you...So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.¹⁰ (Isaiah 41:9-10)

¹⁰ The Spanish translations of the Bible communicate a different connotation with the rendering of “justice” for “righteousness.” “my right hand of justice.”

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