

The Price of Admission...

Reflections on the Immigration debate

By Fr. Dave Heney

The doors of St. Paschal's are open all day to anyone who would like to come in and pray whether they are Catholic or not. But admission is not entirely "free." The only "price" we absolutely require is good behavior, which means that everyone will, at least, act respectfully to the Eucharist, to other people, and even to the church building itself. While I would never presume to comment on anyone's personal relationship with God, I will do everything to assure that people publicly act respectfully and that everyone here does no harm to anyone.

Responsibility for the safety of others changes the way we act. Parents, governments, and parish priests cannot act the same way individuals can. While any one of us might personally choose to risk our own life and confront a dangerous person if we think it might change or convert that person, as Jesus and Gandhi did, we cannot *assign that risk to anyone else*, especially if we are responsible for their safety. The personal courage that Jesus showed in the Gospels is a challenge that each person alone must choose to make for one's self. It cannot be transferred to others. The immigration debate is both about compassion and dignity for those in need as well as the economic and physical safety for our families in a time of terrorism. Defining and agreeing on good behavior may be one important common ground in our immigration debate.

Good behavior is a reasonable "price" to ask as the admission ticket for immigration. Even Native American Indians might have wished for some kind of good behavior as they watched thousands of ships carrying most of our European and African ancestors sail to this continent. Centuries of American history that followed have taught us difficult, sometimes tragic, but always valuable lessons about what is good and bad behavior when people arrive in any new place. They have become the traditional values we now call the "American way." American values are many, but among them we can list; respect the freedom of others, work hard, work honestly, earn your own way, play fair, obey the law, pay taxes, learn English, and know the basics of civics and US history.

WHY THIS DEBATE NOW?

Good hearted people face a number of difficult immigration issues: (1) There are about 12 million people *already* in the country illegally. (2) Many parts of our economy depend on these hard-working laborers, (3) We have a long American and Catholic history of openness especially to those in need and willing to work, and (4) An unsecured and porous border and unreliable identity system means there is no way of knowing *who are sincere hard workers from those who are not*. Can we solve all these important issues?

A few years ago, we might have had a calmer discussion about immigration but several events have made it much more intense: (a) Our vulnerability on and after 9/11 and the *continuing* threats from terrorists to "strike at America" keep concerns about the enforceability of border security high, as recent terrorist attempts have revealed, (b) The rapid increase in border crossings and violence as a consequence of the Mexican drug cartel wars, and (c) The recent Arizona Law, and especially the upcoming November mid-term elections, moves the debate into partisan politics. Some politicians are not above inflaming issues for political agendas.

EVERYONE QUOTES OUR FAITH

Our goal is to resolve this issue morally and legally. But people on all sides can point to this or that scripture or Catholic dogma to make their case. Let me summarize a few main ideas.

Safe and secure borders Our faith affirms the right of homeowners and nations to provide a safe and secure environment for their families and citizens. Every nation has the right and even obligation to establish a rule of law that is just and reliable, as well as determine conditions for entry and citizenship. No one has a right to enter another country without meeting the lawful conditions of that country. While the Statue of Liberty welcomes the “tired, poor, and huddled masses of the world” it does not tell us how to distinguish, from the millions who come here, which are sincerely tired and poor and looking for work and which are terrorists or criminal drug smugglers.

Dignity of all labor Our faith believes that work is noble and dignified and that good workers deserve respect. Our tradition especially honors Joseph, the Carpenter, who provided for his family and even immigrated to Egypt for a few years for their safety. Today, because they are illegal, almost 12 million people work in fear and apprehension of exposure and expulsion, leading to a shadowy and undignified existence and their families in peril.

Business needs workers Our faith encourages an entrepreneurial spirit and the creativity of the human mind to find new business opportunities, not only because it ennobles the entrepreneur, but so also that families may prosper from the new jobs created. Our faith affirms the tremendous benefit immigrant labor continues to have on the American and world economy.

Compassion for those in need Our faith has a long tradition of helping people in emergencies no matter what their status. The famous parable of the compassionate and courageous Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and many others are all examples of providing basic human needs to people in emergency conditions. Our nation has had a long “culture of immigration” and courageous compassion most famously documented on the Statue of Liberty and revealed in the foreign heritage of virtually everyone here.

PATH & PRICE COMPROMISE

Some of the efforts in Congress as of this writing are in the direction of establishing both a rigorous path to citizenship and a significant financial price to pay for it; as well as a “Guest Worker” program that allows documented workers to work here for a set amount of time and then go home. The “path and price” approach is a multi-year sequence of steps that will ensure an immigrant a *chance* at citizenship if they fulfill all of the conditions during their years working here that Americans consider “good behavior,” such as paying taxes, obeying the law, learning English, working hard, and respecting others. There are also plans that would rank the eligibility of a worker’s path to citizenship based on time already spent here.

These are reasonable compromises to deal with the 12 million people *already here who will not come forward* unless there is a reliable law securing a known path to legal status and a specific price to pay. The Guest Worker program would allow a set amount of workers, determined by our economy, to work here for a specified time and then go home. Guest Workers are more likely to return home, and keep their own family in their country of origin, if they know they can come and go under a reliable and enforceable law.

All of these must include new security controls, such as personal biometric cards that absolutely guarantee identity, cannot be forged, and be required for legal employment. This would form a kind of “virtual wall” at the jobsite along with a physical barrier at the border itself. A new high-tech identity card does not require that much more than a US passport today. Even Joseph and Mary allowed themselves to be counted in Bethlehem; “a decree went out from Caesar that a census should be taken of the whole country” (Luke 2:1). Other measures would include employer sanctions for companies that bypass this system, background checks against our ever increasing database of dangerous persons, and improved physical security at the border by both state and federal agencies.

No one knows whether these security controls can be accomplished soon. The Department of Homeland Security is a new department and still struggling to meet the terrorist threats we face. Reliable security is still a worthy goal because security benefits everyone. It assures the safety of citizens and protects the dignity of those who work here or who would like to eventually apply for immigration.

People often come here precisely because their countries of origin have governments that are filled with corruption and do not ensure a reliable rule of law that protects their citizens and the marketplace. While we cannot legislate for other countries, our efforts to improve the legal and economic situation in other nations will help a great deal.

GOOD & RELIABLE LAWS BRING PEACE, DIGNITY, & SECURITY.

Today, very few laws that govern our borders, prevent illegal employment, or even provide compassionate care for those in emergency need are reliably enforced. Nothing good will come of any solution if it is not grounded in good and just laws that are reliably enforced.

God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses not as optional recommendations but as essential and reliable ways that God designed to live a happier life at all times and in every place. When Jesus called disciples to “Follow me” it was to live a certain way that brings happiness in this life and salvation in the next. Both the Commandments and the way of the Lord are meant to be lived *all* the time and everywhere. Our faith also has a path to reconciliation for our sinfulness, but we are still grateful for a “rule of law” of our faith that also reveals the very importance of laws that are good, just, and authoritative.

The rule of law, or “American good behavior,” helps everyone relax on all sides of this debate. Reliable laws help illegal workers come out of the shadows and face the future with more certainty and assurance knowing they have specified rights and an assured process for their

future success, whether as Guest Workers or future citizens. Reliable laws help those with security concerns because they will know that reliable measures are in place to determine who is crossing our border, how many, and what they are doing. Reliable laws also allow the business community to relax knowing they will have a regular stream of the workers they need to promote jobs, wealth, and an expanding economy.

Laws that are just and good are more likely to be enforced so we should take the time to ensure they are written well. Any law that arises emotionally out of fear or primitive stereotypes will only fail later. The history of prohibition reveals a law can be well intentioned but unintelligent. Slavery, and racial discrimination were legal for centuries but unjust and caused much damage. Some events remain that are immoral but still legally protected, like abortion and pornography. Some laws are universal and always true no matter what, such as the dignity of a human person. We can never violate that dignity or treat a person as an object for our use. If someone is in need of emergency help, we must respond.

WHAT IS THE UNITED STATES?

We are a very different kind of country and unlike any other in the history of the world. We do not share a common ethnicity as other countries do, e.g., Spain has mainly Spaniards and Japan has mainly Japanese. America is more “everyone from everywhere.” With the exception of Native Americans Indians, virtually every person in the United States has a heritage that came from someplace else. That is the good news. Leaving one’s home of origin for a hoped for better future is a remarkable, admirable, and even an “entrepreneurial act” in that it takes energy, hope, risk, talent, ingenuity, intelligence and especially courage to make a difficult journey for some hoped-for better result.

These entrepreneurial values gradually developed into what is called “the American Spirit,” and perhaps is the key to our remarkable success. We value ingenuity, innovation, invention,

risk taking investments, entrepreneurship, labor-saving devices, cleverness, and intelligence.

Years ago, our country was a vast and expansive territory when perhaps your own immigrant ancestors first arrived. That open space might have reinforced their already innate sense of freedom and opportunity. If they could not find work in one place there was always a new chance in the valley next door or over the next mountain range to create a new opportunity. Today, land is no longer boundless but the same sense of business opportunity as ever expanding has also become enshrined as the "American Spirit." However, the sense of opportunity, hope, and expectation of future progress are *personality* features. People either have them or they don't. Hope is an *emotional* virtue that senses the future can be better with personal creativity and hard work. Immigration tends to select those personalities who already have this sense that opportunities are endless and there is always plenty of success and fortune to be found.

Perhaps another key to American success is the emotional sense that successful people often have that the "pie" is always getting bigger. In the 1970's there was much talk about the "end of growth." Then the computer and internet age arrived. Now we are in the age of the global marketplace. No one predicted these world changing events except perhaps those who just knew there would be some new opportunity "on the other side of the hill." If you feel the "pie" is getting smaller, no amount of logical arguments will work because that sense of ever shrinking resources and resentment for new competitors are issues of a person's personality.

WHO IS A UNITED STATES CITIZEN?

Many Americans have an incredibly diverse ancestral heritage, perhaps with almost every nation represented in any one person's family tree. America has never been an ethnic nation, as our founders so well understood. Our country is basically a set of ideas set out in our most

treasured foundational documents like the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. They lay out a set of good behaviors that are before every person to accept or not. If you accept them and live them, you are an American. What makes any person an American is fidelity to those behaviors. They are affirmed by new citizens when they say an oath to those ideals and renewed by every citizen whenever we say the Pledge of Allegiance.

There are then, only two kinds of people in America, those who practice good behavior and those who do not. We don't have to pay attention as much to ethnicity, country of origin, culture, race, or gender. We can simply ask, "Do we know for sure that this person is decent or not? Does this person subscribe to American behavior and ideals or not? The price of admission and even our own citizenship remains good behavior.

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