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IMMIGRATION USA: AN INTERCULTURAL WAKE-UP CALL

“Immigration and globalization may make people neighbors
but they will not make them brothers and sisters.”

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

The article deals with complex topics of migration at the US-Mexican border and analyzes reasons and backgrounds for the migration flows to the USA. Particularly, the growing number of migrant children calls for attention. One of the important reasons for migration appears to be the political involvement of the USA in Central and South America over the last decades and its production of large-scale violence and corruption. The Churches on either side of the border try to come to terms with their vocation to serve the poor and vulnerable in the migrants. In a wider sense, drawing on Pope Francis' stance, the prevailing economy of exclusion and the ensuing violence is put into the perspective of global challenges in the context of creation and the perspective of intercultural engagement towards a more humane society.

1. Immigration Today

Since the dawn of humanity people have always moved about the globe seeking a safer, more peaceful, prosperous and fulfilled life. One might even consider this roaming existence to be more human than our sedentary urban life, which is a mere 10,000 years old. But what we are witnessing today is something quite extraordinary. According to the United Nations, there are 232 million international migrants. This represents a rise of more than 50 percent since 1990 (Rocca 2014) and it is steadily increasing. According to the European Union border agency, Frontex, 42,000 illegal immigrants reached the

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EU between January and April, four times more than in the same period last year. Italian authorities have reported that in May 2014 a further 14,000 migrants arrived in the country through key central Mediterranean routes for illegal immigration, bringing the total for 2014 to over 55,000 already.

Africans and Middle Easterners are pouring across the Mediterranean and Latinos across the Rio Grande. Neither the old barriers of mountains, forests, oceans or deserts, nor the new chain-link curtains that separate our national frontiers are able any longer to separate the rich from the poor, the powerful from the weak, or prevent the chance of a new life for the millions of hungry, homeless and oppressed. But this increased volume of migration, immigration, and human trafficking is an indicator of something deeper and more sinister, a sense of desperation flowing from the grossest disregard for human life. The fearful result is violence and misery on a global scale. At a meeting of clerics and aid experts on the crisis triggered by conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Gaza, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga called it the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II.

In Syria 200,000 have been killed over the last three years of conflict, 6.4 million have been displaced, half of whom are children, and three million live outside their country while the 13 million back home cry out in despair (Rotondaro 2014). Countries neighboring conflict zones are flooded. Turkey is now the border between hope and despair for 1.7 million Syrian refugees and tens of thousands of Afghans, Iranians and others. In Iraq over 1.8 million have been displaced and 10,000 have camped out at the French embassy in Baghdad waiting for visas. In Gaza 10,000 homes have been destroyed. Due to political, ethnic and religious violence, these and other hot spots including Afghanistan, Libya, the Ukraine, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Nigeria are producing migrants by the millions.

Pope Francis calls this extreme violence, where bombs kill the guilty along with innocent women and children, a “Third World War.” In today’s conflicts we have removed the human element. Our international humanitarian laws, which are meant to protect the civilian population in times of conflict and occupation, are simply no longer there. Humans count for nothing. This is a war against humanity (O’Connell 2014).

1.1 Child Immigrants

Of all these violent flashpoints, the place where this war is perhaps the most visible and heartrending is, quite ironically, the place

that owes its very existence to immigrants—the United States of America. Since 9/11 the US has grown increasingly more suspicious and closed in on itself. At a time when its traditional compassion is more needed than ever before, its welcoming arms are closed tight. At a time when immigration rates in the US are higher than ever and when those who are immigrating—including, for the first time, lone child immigrants—are more vulnerable, the avenues for legal immigration are more restricted than ever. America is no longer a home for immigrants.

Since 2011 there has been a steady increase in child migration fleeing Central America. Twenty years ago, it was only the young men who immigrated. Then it was the older men; then the women; then whole families; and now it is children who are sent alone by parents. Between 2004 and 2011 about 6,800 unaccompanied minors traveled across the US-Mexico border each year. Then the number jumped to 13,000 in 2012 and to 24,000 in 2013. More than 60,000 unaccompanied children have already crossed the border this year and, by the end of 2014, it is estimated that it will reach 100,000. There will be even more next year. Only absolute desperation would lead to such an exodus.

The children are fleeing the violence and lawlessness that permeates Central America where the lack of economic and educational opportunity leads to grinding poverty,¹ family breakdown and absolute vulnerability. Families live in constant fear. They are harassed by the gangs who are in complete control and who extort a 25 percent weekly tax from everyone under their thumb (McCarty 2014). As a Salvadorian woman explained, “If we stay, our kids will fall prey to the gangs. If they migrate, they may die on the way.... We have no way out.... The only one who can bring us out of this is God” (Zapor 2014). It comes down to three choices: join the gangs, flee or death. Those who flee and finally make it, send their hard-earned money back home. But the gangs intercept it leaving them poorer and more victimized.

Most of them are coming from Guatemala (35 percent), El Salvador (27 percent) and Honduras (25 percent). These are the Central American countries that experienced so much violence, turmoil and civil wars from the 1970s to the 1990s. They are the countries whose citizens were tortured, extorted and “disappeared” halfway to extinction by their own right-wing governments with strong support from American economic and political interests. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world. El Salvador has the highest murder rate of

¹ The average family income is between 4,800 and 7,500 dollars per year.

women in the world, and Guatemala and Mexico are close behind. In Honduras 920 children were murdered in the space of three months in 2012. There is simply no hope at home. Is it any wonder that children are braving a journey of 1,500 perilous miles by themselves in search of sanctuary?

The journey is fraught with even greater dangers than at home. They must first find their way to the Guatemala-Mexico border where the trek suddenly becomes more treacherous. Mexico, where the police is in league with the gangs, offers little protection. There were 10,000 abductions of migrants in 2009, half of which involved the authorities. With scarce financial resources, these children, along with many others, jump freight trains known as *La Bestia* (the Beast) or *La Muerte* (train of death). They fall losing arms or legs, and all along the way they are harassed and extorted by the international criminal organizations, *Los Zetas*, who control drugs, trafficking and slavery, and the gangs, like *MS-13* (Mara Salvatrucha-13) and the 12th Street gang, who control the routes. Many are forced to join the gangs. If they refuse they are beaten or shot. 60 percent of them are raped, 80 percent are robbed or kidnapped and held for ransom, and 50 percent are forced into some form of trafficking. Pastoral workers who try to help them are killed for interfering (McCarty 2014).

The trek seems even more hopeless than the situation at home; yet it continues. Many have the mistaken belief that the United States is giving asylum to children—that there is an amnesty for illegal immigrants who are unaccompanied minors. While it is true that at least 60 percent of the children reaching the USA have valid asylum claims, they do not have the legal resources to press for these rights and most of them will be sent back. Another strong reason is the myth of economic opportunity—that in the USA money grows on trees. Denying it only seems to contribute to its credibility. But the deepest causes of immigration are the extreme poverty, lawlessness, and criminal organizations.

1.2 US Involvement

Many in the United States think the refugee crisis is a problem foisted on them by unlawful immigrants, but it is a calamity for which America bears weighty responsibility. Much of the lawlessness prompting people to leave has its origins from the 70s through the 90s in the activities of the CIA and US Security Agencies, along with their agents who were trained at the infamous “School of the Americas.” The gang system got its start in the California penal system. Most of the assault rifles used by the gangs and illegal organizations

are manufactured in the USA and bought with drug money from the USA. The Honduran president recently noted that the gang violence at the root of the child exodus is largely the result of America's insatiable demand for illegal drugs. Now the trouble is coming back to roost (The Editors, *Commonweal*, 2014).

The poverty and violence that sustains the lawlessness arose from the uneven political economy brought about and reinforced by the military-industrial interests of the USA. Corrupt Latin American dictators were positioned to foster right-wing governments which maintained the plantation owners. These policies, favoring the rich over the peoples' welfare, started with the 1954 CIA-backed overthrow of the democratically elected Guatemalan government and since then the CIA has consistently carried on covert operations in their service.

To his credit, President Obama has, at least temporarily, broken the stalemate imposed by Congress on immigration reform by issuing an executive order. He has also helped with \$3.7 billion that is meant to accelerate legal proceedings and to provide "humanitarian assistance." But, in the greater scheme of things, both measures are very modest. His executive order is only a first step and most of the emergency appropriations are not really "humanitarian" at all. Homeland security will receive 1.5 billion for increased enforcement, overtime pay, and more border patrols, and the 300 million for "foreign aid" will go to speeding up deportation and discouraging families. All totaled, only 1.8 billion actually goes to health and human services to "care" for them while in detention, and even this is suspect given the profit motive of the private companies handling the detention. The Obama administration has also recently announced plans to allow minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to apply for refugee status within their own countries, which will help some to enter legally. But most will be deterred by officialdom and lack of legal and financial resources (McCarty 2014).

Injustice and inhumanity have seeped into the very organizations that are meant to uphold justice and protect. Pope Francis calls torture a "crime against humanity," yet it has become an ordinary way of behaving by intelligence and law enforcement officials. Senate investigations have recently found that the CIA has been using "enhanced interrogations" in its detention activities and has lied about this for years (The Editors, *Commonweal*, 2014). This unaccountability and breaches of the American people's trust ought to be challenged, but it rather seems to have permeated the whole detention concept.

When the immigrants reach the US borders they continue to be abused and victimized. The Women's Refugee Commission reported to the United Nations last March that migrant children taken into custody by the US Customs and Border Patrol face "excessive force" and treatment that is "inhumane and degrading." In the Mass of April 1, 2014, held on the Arizona-Mexican border to remember the estimated 6,000 migrants who have died in the US southwestern deserts while attempting to cross over to freedom, Cardinal O'Malley of Boston sadly acknowledged the fact that peace keeping in the USA now means "muzzling the complaints of the poor and oppressed" (The Editors, *Commonweal*, 2014).

1.3 Follow the Money

If we wish to know the reasons for this inhumane treatment, we only need to ask who profits from the injustice. Besides the criminals and international crime cartels, those in the US private prisons industry also profit exceedingly. It charges \$164 per immigrant detainee per day, and detains about half of all undocumented immigrants caught by the ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] for an average of five months. The Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group, the two largest private prison companies, had a combined revenue of \$3.3 billion in 2012. Over the past year 57,500 minors have been detained in facilities overseen by the Office for Refugee Resettlement. Instead of posting them on bail, immigrants are detained at a total cost to US taxpayers of \$5 million per day. There are many quite effective and immensely less expensive and intrusive methods available to ensure compliance with immigration laws, such as community-based models, case management and the use of ankle monitors (Peck 2014). Why aren't they used?

The painful irony is that, after this long and expensive detention process, most are sent back only to return again. In 2012, 60 percent of unaccompanied children taken into custody were repatriated to their country where most will turn around and try again. My next-door neighbor in Los Angeles made six such trips from Guatemala, one with each of his children and finally with his wife.

Insufficient and misplaced foreign aid to Central America exacerbates the problem. They need economic development, social services, humanitarian assistance and aid for peace, security and greater stability. They need help in their war against terror, narcotics, internal conflict and transnational crime. But the aid is insufficient and seldom reaches where it could do the most good. In Honduras the total amount budgeted this year for peace and security is a mere \$5.2 mil-

lion, which, as one commentator pointed out, is the equivalent of a California beach house or four months of overtime pay for Texas state troopers on border duty (Peck 2014). It will be decreased to \$3.9 million in 2015. To get some perspective on this, the cost of a new aircraft carrier is \$25.8 billion, or 178 times more than the whole foreign aid budget for all of Central America. The total amount in aid for peace and security to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala is about \$150 million a year. Obama's \$3.7 billion appropriation is really only a band-aid solution. We need 25 times that amount in order to really solve the problem and stem the tide of immigration (McCarty 2014).

The problem is aggravated by a general lack of understanding and manipulation by the media which ignore the facts and fan the fires of hatred and suspicion with accusations about third columns of radical Islamic terrorists entering the country. The border crisis is not an issue of US internal security but one of poverty, injustice, and disorder for which the American people are partly responsible. The media have the power to put a stop to it but they want to sell copy so they appeal to the masses, who are at the lowest levels of intercultural sensitivity.²

1.4 The Church's Response

The US needs to see immigration as part of a broader picture. The crisis involves relationships between many countries and so it requires a bilateral response. The Catholic Church has been sensitive to this for some time. The US and Mexican bishops have been working together on this issue for many years. The Pope calls for an even broader approach: "Only a systematic and active cooperation between states and international organizations can be capable of regulating and managing such movements effectively" (Peck 2014). Francis seeks a response which "relies on a universal network of cooperation, based on safeguarding the dignity and centrality of every human person" (Zapor 2014). The Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerants urged on by St. John Paul II's apostolic constitution, *Pastor Bonus*, has also been encouraging a world-wide ministry of outreach and protection, and Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, recently reminded the UN of its fundamental responsibility in this regard.

The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA and other religious and nonprofit organiza-

² These are "denial" and "defense" on Milton Bennett's "Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" (1993).

tions have led the way in protecting the lost children. They provide information on how to sponsor an immigrant child. Families and individuals who foster a child receive stipends to cover the cost of their care, and shelters that take them in receive compensation. Individuals can become guardians by agreeing to mentor a child so the young migrants can try to qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and not be automatically deported. A law permitting immigrants to obtain drivers licenses will take effect in 2015 and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles is assisting immigrants with obtaining licenses by holding workshops in parishes. Parishes throughout the Archdiocese are also offering them food, housing, placement with families, medical and legal care (Zapor 2014).

Church organizations and government are now working together more closely. Governor Brown of California is assisting the legal care effort of the Churches with an additional three million dollars. The US Government has initiated a nine-million-dollar project offering legal services to 2,600 children over two years—\$4.2 million this year and \$4.8 million for next year (Zapor 2014). The USCCB on behalf of the church's legal aid agencies will receive \$2.2 million and the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants will receive \$2 million. The USCCB funding will be distributed through the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., or CLINIC, to major archdioceses around the USA, to help the more than 66,000 unaccompanied minors who have been apprehended this year (Peck 2014). Krystin Peck³ calls this "huge and precedent-setting," but in the overall scheme of things it is far from sufficient.

Christian and other charitable associations are working as best they can. But individual, and even national, efforts to help migrants on their own are inadequate. Aside from the active cooperation of international organizations and the need for greater systemization, we also need a new attitude, a new way of looking at migrants, a change of heart. Pope Francis' response to the globalization of migration is a "globalization of charity and cooperation." He urges us to honor the "biblical commandment of welcoming with respect and solidarity the stranger in need," and to recognize in refugees the invisible Christ in our midst (Zapor 2014).

From a faith perspective, we are all one family. A worker in El Salvador put it this way, "If the migrant is not your brother or sister, then God is not your father." Francis reaffirmed this in his remarks on World Refugee Day in June 2013, when he called the refugees our

³ Krystyn Peck is the associate director of children's services for Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

brothers and sisters: “We cannot be insensitive to these families or towards our refugee brothers and sisters. We are called to help them, opening ourselves to understanding and hospitality” (Zapor 2014).

2. An Economy of Exclusion

The Pope’s concern for the homeless, nationless masses has been powerfully manifest in his journeys and pronouncements. His trip to Lampedusa, where he honored those who died in their attempt to cross continents in search of freedom and prosperity, shows that he sides with the faceless millions on the move in our world today. Since then he has met with international refugees on his visit to the Holy Land and has strongly denounced human trafficking and the oppression of migrants wherever he goes. His message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees entitled, “Church without Frontiers, Mother to All,” speaks plainly to this crisis: “Large numbers of people are leaving their homelands, with a suitcase full of fears and desires, to undertake a hopeful and dangerous trip in search of more humane living conditions.” He also refers to the equally important cultural issues arising from this: “Such migration gives rise to suspicion and hostility, *even in ecclesial communities*, prior to any knowledge of the migrants’ lives or their stories of persecution and destitution.” Besides being a major cause of immigration, violence is also a result of such mass movements for it puts people together who think and act differently, and who easily misjudge others and act on their stereotypes. Migrants are different and don’t fit in. If you try to make them fit in it produces fear, rejection and more violence.

The immigration problem is not just about how to overcome torture, violence, lawlessness, or poverty. Pope Francis says that we now live in “an economy of exclusion.” An ever greater proportion of the world’s wealth and resources goes to fewer and fewer. It is the rich and powerful against the poor and helpless. The economy of exclusion is intensified by our global communications which make us instantly aware of the things we don’t have. Internet technology has commoditized the whole world holding up for the common view virtually everything as easily attainable. This means a near constant salvo on the senses and new desires in need of gratification. For the global South these newly created desires outstrip any possibility of attainment leading to smoldering discontent. Now the most commonly heard prayer in Africa’s prosperity churches is for US visas: “If only I can get there, to white man’s land, all my needs will be met.” Yet, the louder and more strident the myth of accessibility grows, the higher grow the barriers of exclusion.

Mass communication intensifies this global “us—them,” rich—poor, economy of exclusion where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, because recognition of these stark differences increases the discontent. If women in the US ask why they are only paid 70 percent of a man’s salary for the same work, mass communication has made those from the global South ask why they are paid only 10 percent. The whole world wants what America has, but the whole world cannot possibly live like middle-class Americans—the resources that would be needed would require 13 planets like earth! The Pope suggests learning to live with less. Yet this is not an option for the rich, for whom there is never enough, nor for the poor, whose unmet basic needs will not permit living with less. Unless we broaden our perspective, people from the global South will continue moving to where the dollar trees grow, and the global North will do all they can to exclude them.

3. The Larger Picture

The economy of exclusion is part of a larger picture where the wealthy and powerful live in a world that is closed not only to the poverty and suffering of others,⁴ it is also closed to the suffering and the very life of our planet.⁵ This World War III scenario affects not only our relations with one another, it also affects the earth we walk and the air we breathe. It, too, is a reflection of the anti-life culture embedded in the structures and institutions of our world.⁶ This war is part of a culture of death involving not only human suffering and death but also climate change, the destruction of our forests,⁷ the polluting of our waters, the decimation of our wildlife,⁸ the wounding of our soil and the earth’s decreasing ability to heal itself.

⁴ This is a common theme in films today, viz., the “Hunger Games” series.

⁵ Also a common theme in films, e.g., “Interstellar.”

⁶ It has been proposed that, as a last resort, if that is the only way to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, one state may intervene in the affairs of another without its permission. In our present context this needs broader application to the global economic institutions and conglomerates that are destroying our planet.

⁷ When I arrived as a missionary to Ghana in 1972 one could travel from where the forest began some 15 miles from the coast to the open savannahs a further 300 miles north as if going through a tunnel that obliterated the sun, the forest was so thick. Now along that same path one sees only an occasional unmarketable tree against a bleak horizon.

⁸ Biological diversity of species has declined 52 percent since 1970.

Africans have a sense of this interconnectedness when they make peace with the earth spirit as the very condition and context for settling wars and crimes against humanity, or whenever human blood is spilt on the earth. For whenever human life is taken, the earth dies a little, and when the earth dies all life goes with it. Life is one. Fostering a culture of life means much more than being anti-abortion or picketing munitions plants. Protecting the poor and oppressed is vitally connected with protecting our environment, reversing climate change and restoring the life of our planet.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has said: "Immigration and globalization may make people neighbors but they will not make them brothers and sisters." Indeed, the world's cultures are everywhere rubbing shoulders and heating things up. We Christians may gain support, in making the world our brothers and sisters, from our faith, but what of those who may not be so moved by biblical commandments? How will we see the face of Jesus, or a brother or a sister in our neighbor when all we can see is an enemy? How does the world build a broader set of relationships deeply rooted in an experience of our common humanity? How can we begin to see clearly that our differences are not just challenges to be overcome but rich sources of renewed vitality and life? These questions urge us to see the economy of exclusion, the polarizing of peoples and the culture of death as a wake-up call.

We are now at a turning point in our human evolution and, of all the issues that our world currently faces, migration most clearly sums up our human predicament and highlights the features needed for our, indeed the world's, renewal and flourishing. In our shrunken and afflicted world, this issue, above all others, invites a new approach to the way we understand and deal with cultural diversity. In our new global reality we need to learn how to live and prosper with diversity; we need to become more interculturally sensitive.

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ABSTRACTS

Der Beitrag behandelt die komplexen Themen im Zusammenhang mit der Migration an der Grenze zwischen den USA und Mexiko und analysiert Gründe und Kontexte für die Migrationsflüsse nach den USA. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit verdient die wachsende Zahl von Kindern unter den Migranten. Einer der wesentlichen Gründe für die Migration liegt im politischen Handeln der USA in Zentral- und Südamerika in den letzten Jahrzehnten und der daraus resultierenden umfassenden Gewalttätigkeit und Korruption. Die Kirchen auf beiden Seiten der Grenze versuchen, sich ihrer Berufung zum Dienst an den Armen und Gefährdeten in der Gestalt der Migranten zu stellen. In einem weiteren Zusammenhang, im Gefolge der Positionen von Papst Franziskus, stellt der Artikel das vorherrschende Wirtschaftssystem der Ausgrenzung und der daraus folgenden Gewalt in den Horizont globaler Herausforderungen der Schöpfung und eines interkulturellen Engagements für eine menschlichere Gesellschaft.

Este artículo trata los temas complejos de la migración en la frontera entre los EEUU y México y analiza las razones y trasfondos de la migración hacia los EEUU. Especialmente llama la atención el creciente número de niños migrantes. Una de las razones importantes por la migración aparece en la política de los EEUU en América Central y del Sur de las últimas décadas y su consiguiente producción de violencia y corrupción a gran escala. Las Iglesias de ambos lados de la frontera intentan asumir su vocación de servicio a los pobres y vulnerables, presentes en los migrantes. En un sentido más

amplio y siguiendo la inspiración del Papa Francisco, la economía de exclusión predominante y su secuela de violencia se ubica en el horizonte de los desafíos globales de la creación y de un compromiso intercultural por una sociedad más humana.

Cet article traite de sujets complexes concernant la migration à la frontière entre les États-Unis et le Mexique. Le nombre croissant d'enfants migrants requiert particulièrement notre attention. L'une des raisons importantes de la migration réside dans l'engagement politique des États-Unis en Amérique centrale et du Sud depuis plusieurs dizaines d'années, ce qui a entraîné violence et corruption à grande échelle. De chaque côté de la frontière, les Églises essaient de répondre à leur vocation d'aide aux plus pauvres et vulnérables. Plus globalement, s'appuyant sur les positions du pape François, l'article met en perspective l'économie d'exclusion et la violence qui s'ensuit dans le cadre des défis mondiaux concernant la création et les projets d'engagement intercultural pour une société plus humaine.