

## **"Nothing From Outside Can Defile You" (Mk 7:15): Advent and Immigrant Rights**

By Ched Myers

*Published in Priests and People, May, 2000.*

IT IS A FEW NIGHTS BEFORE Christmas, 1994. A small group of us are singing thinly, clutching candles against a chilly drizzle. We slowly make our way up a muddy hill. Below us an orange glow floats like fog above the border checkpoint at San Ysidro, California. "*En nombre del cielo, les pido posada,*" sings one group. "*Pues no puede andar mi esposa amada*" ("In the name of Heaven I beg you for lodging, for my beloved wife cannot walk").

We have come to this barren hilltop at the U.S.-Mexico border on a *posada* march. This traditional Mexican liturgy is celebrated throughout the Catholic Southwest during the last nine days of Advent, a kind of public ritual theater. People accompany statues of the Holy Family from house to house around the *barrio*, waiting to be recognized and allowed in so that the Christ-child may be born. This *posada*, however, has intentionally come to a door that is closed and heavily guarded: the U.S.-Mexican border. It has been organized by immigrants' rights groups to protest legislation in California that would criminalize delivery of public health, education and welfare services to undocumented immigrants.

In response to Joseph's petition for shelter, sung by the group on the Mexican side of the border, we (representing the voice of the innkeeper) intone: "*Aqui no es meson; sigan adelante. Yo no puedo abrir; no sea algun tunante*" ("This is not an inn, so keep going. I cannot open, for you may be bad people"). Holding aloft three large pinatas representing Mary, Joseph and the innkeeper, we are gathered on both sides of the menacing border fence, a ten-foot high metal wall donated to the U.S. Border Patrol by the Pentagon after Desert Storm—one war's surplus bolstering another war's front lines.

For as far as we can see from this dark hilltop the no-man's-land of the border is bathed by floodlights and thick with Border Patrol vehicles and helicopters. Today these "innkeepers" spend millions of taxpayer dollars in an effort to reduce illegal entries across this, the world's most heavily used border crossing. Their mission is, ironically, to keep out the very ones who, a century earlier, were expressly invited into the U.S. in the extraordinary verse of the immigrant poet Emma Lazarus that are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... Send those, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The refrain of Joseph resounds: “*No seas inhumano; tenos caridad. Que el Dios de los cielos te lo pagara*” (“Don't be inhuman; have mercy on us. The God of the heavens will reward you for it.”) We sing the *posadas* litany back and forth across the wall, hearing but not seeing one another. To symbolize our solidarity green ribbons are passed through small holes in the fence. “We pray that the day will come when we can have a *posada sin fronteras* (without borders),” the Auxiliary Bishop of San Diego Rev. Gilbert Chavez tells the gathering. “If we reject the poor, we are rejecting Jesus Christ himself.” Turning up the collar of my coat against the cold, I marvel at this liturgy of hope, celebrated along a wall that runs right through the heart of this congregation, and of our church and nation.

“*Ya se pueden ir, y no molestar,*” threatens the Innkeeper's verse. “*Porque si me enojo les voy a pegar*” (“Better go on, and don't bother us. For if I become angry, I shall beat you up.”) Behind us a knot of Border Patrol officers keep a watchful eye. An activist colleague next to me laments about the trend of increased Border Patrol abuses. When the liturgy finishes, doves are released on both sides of the fence and fly off, unrestrained by the metal fence. As we move away I reflect on how barren this border terrain is, the only place where First and Third World stand adjacent. It is a free fire zone in the war against the poor and the refugee, the New Global Economic Order's Berlin Wall.

But this nontraditional geography has brought *posadas* poignantly and painfully alive. Like the gospel story it enacts, it poses a hard question to the North American church: How will we stand in solidarity with the “sojourners and aliens in our midst” (Dt 24:14ff) if the law systematically criminalizes them?

THE GOSPEL IS NOT silent on these issues. It is endemic to human nature that social groups establish boundaries in order to determine who is “in” and who is “out.” Sometimes these are physical impediments, such as fenced borders. Other times they are symbolic, articulated through exclusive and/or defining cultural practices—a kosher diet, for example. Such boundaries are effective in keeping people apart. This can be a good thing—when they help protect weaker people from domination by stronger people. More often, however, boundaries function in the opposite manner: to protect the strong from the weak. It is this latter kind of boundary—the kind that seek to establish the structural privilege of a dominant group and to insulate it from the disenfranchised—that the Bible consistently challenges.

The Law and the Prophets clearly warned Israel not to discriminate against economic or political refugees because in G-d's eyes even the chosen People were “but alien and tenants” (Lev 25:23). Tolerance for the “outsider” comes to full realization in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In the famous last-judgment parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew's gospel, for example, Jesus commands those who remember and obeyed the injunctions of Torah: “I was a stranger and

you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35b). But the issue may be most clearly addressed in another parable found in Mark.

"There is nothing which goes into you that can defile you; only that which comes out of you defiles you" teaches Jesus in Mk 7:15. This episode addresses the ritual function of the Purity Code of first century Palestinian Jews. Mark's Jesus is defending his disciples' practice of sharing table fellowship with the "unclean" outsider (7:1-5) by insisting that "What goes into a person's body from the outside cannot contaminate it" (7:18b). This is explicitly presented by mark as a *parable* that disciples must *understand* (vv 17f).

Jesus seems to be proposing the physical body as a symbol of the "body politic" of Israel (in fact this was a common political metaphor in antiquity, employed later also by the Apostle Paul, see I Cor 12:12ff). His point is that the social boundaries constructed by the Purity Code are powerless to protect the integrity of the community, which can only truly be "corrupted" from *within*. In what may be at once his most radical and most widely ignored teaching. Jesus here rejects all culturally proprietary boundaries that allege to protect a community from perceived external threats. Outsiders must neither be scapegoated nor excluded, he argues. Instead, we must look to our own behavior--"Only that which comes out of you defiles you" (v 20).

This interpretation is vindicated by the episodes that follow in Mark's narrative. For Jesus' own ethnic honor is next challenged by a female foreigner (Mk 7:24-37), and the expanded circle of inclusion is then illustrated by the feeding of the multitudes in Gentile territory (8:1-9). On the heels of these object lessons is Jesus' warning to his disciples: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Herodians" (8:15). This leaven represents the "traditions" of social and political conformity which jeopardize the "one loaf" around which the church is called to gather (8:16ff).

Amidst the current culture wars being waged around the world that marginalize immigrants and refugees, therefore, the church must again "hear and understand" this teaching (7:14). If we refuse to take sides with today's outsiders, we too are "without understanding" (7:18a).

IT WAS ISRAEL'S OWN BITTER EXPERIENCE that undergirded its ethic of just compassion toward outsiders: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex 22:21). This ought to be instructive for a nation of immigrants such as the United States. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the percentage of (mostly European) foreign-born residents in the U.S. hovered consistently between 12 and 15 percent. Today, my own state of California is the new Ellis Island, receiving some 40% of all new legal immigrants, mostly from Latin America and Asia. But there is no welcome for the "tempest-tossed" today. Anti-immigrant legislation has instilled a new fear into undocumented people, and Latinos as a whole). What is it about us that insists upon further dehumanizing those who are already the poorest of the poor?

"Immigration has traditionally aroused strong passions in the United States," writes political scientist Saskia Sassen. "Although Americans like to profess pride in their history as a 'nation of immigrants,' each group of arrivals, once established, has fought to keep newcomers out. Over the past two centuries, each new wave of immigrants has encountered strenuous opposition from earlier arrivals." Indeed, ever since Columbus Europeans have justified their domination of North America through myths that asserted a divine right to migrate in search of freedom and opportunity. Yet once settled, the conquerors turned around and, through myths of proprietary entitlement, have tried to restrict or deny that "right" to newer immigrants. We are an immigrant and refugee people whose attitudes toward today's sojourners range from ambivalence to contempt. Does this suggest a deep, collective self-hatred?

Anti-immigrant complaints have been heard since the earliest days of European America. In 1751, for example, Benjamin Franklin worried about German farmers settling in Pennsylvania: "Why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements and, by herding together, establish their language and manners to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?"

Such ethnocentric ideology has always been one of the factors behind U.S. immigration policy. In 1882 the first politically-specific immigration restrictions were passed, banning convicts, polygamists, anarchists and communists. During the Cold War, ethnic quota systems were introduced, targeting non-northern Europeans. And after the Vietnam war, partisan refugee and asylum laws persisted, affecting Cubans and Southeast Asians positively, Chileans, Iranians and Haitians negatively. Immigration and naturalization laws were overhauled in 1965, again in 1986, and again in the early 1990s, but continue to discriminate against Third World immigrants.

In fact, the fluctuations U.S. immigration policy have been driven as much by *economic* forces as by political ones. During the economic boom of the 1870s Chinese contract laborers were recruited; in 1883 the Chinese Exclusion law was passed. Mexican workers were sought due to a World War I labor shortage; one-half million were deported during the Depression of the 1930s. Mexican agricultural workers were again recruited during World War Two through the *bracero* program, and again one million were deported in the late 1950s in "Operation Wetback."

With the economic stagnation of the 1980s immigrant scapegoating grew predictably, reaching fever pitch just as double-dip recession peaked in California, accompanied by a rise in hate crimes and reactionary nativist activism. "There is an unmistakable pattern to recession in the United States," writes sociologist Jorge Bustamante. "When unemployment rises beyond politically acceptable levels, xenophobic sentiments go on the march." The economic boom of the late 90s has eased the tensions somewhat, but hasn't restrained the militarization of the U.S.-

Mexico border, from "Operation Blockade" in El Paso to "Operation Gatekeeper" in San Diego.

The real tragedy is that popular scapegoating, which reflects widespread, if misplaced, frustration about social and economic woes, will only grow, because the global economy will continue to displace peoples in unprecedented numbers. If Christians are to stand in solidarity with the immigrant poor, we must understand the larger structural forces that drive this displacement. Public discussions of immigration in the U.S. tend to focus on "pull" rather than on "push" factors. Third World immigrants are accused of taking advantage of better social conditions and economic opportunity here. While this is true for a minority, the vast majority of immigrants--documented and undocumented alike--are coming as the result of involuntary removal by military, political and economic forces.

One can trace immigration patterns directly to the impact of U.S. military policies in "sending" countries. For example, Sassen points out that in the five years *before* U.S. military intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 some 5,000 Dominicans emigrated to the U.S. In the five years following, the number increased to some 60,000. The war in Indochina brought tens of thousands of Southeast Asians here; another decade of US- sponsored counterinsurgency war in Central America brought equal numbers of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Guatemalans.

"Structural adjustment" has had an equally devastating impact. U.S. collaboration with national security states in Asia not only spawned rapid industrialization and repression--it also brought many Taiwanese, South Koreans, and Filipinos to sweatshops and ghetto liquor stores in our cities. Reaganomics, deregulation and privatization have seen economic deterioration in Mexico--driving millions of Mexicans off their land and into our fields and poorest *barrios*. U.S. industrial flight to Third World "free export zones" may net prosperity for elites in the host country, but it also effects social disruption. Export-led development and "modernization" has meant massive displacement of small landholders and subsistence farmers. Sassen describes for example how the exodus of young women to Mexican *maquiladoras* has uprooted village life, destroying its social fabric and intensifying rural poverty.

Meanwhile, deindustrialization in the U.S., and the resulting casualization of labor in an increasingly service-oriented, low-wage and even "underground" economy draws many of these economic refugees here. "Paradoxically, the very measures commonly thought to deter immigration--foreign investment and the promotion of export-oriented growth in developing countries--seem to have had precisely the opposite effect," argues Sassen. "The clearest proof of this is the fact that several of the newly industrializing countries ... are simultaneously becoming the most important suppliers of immigrants to the United States."

Those who wish to stem undocumented immigration, therefore, would do better to work to close the global open shop than to support futile attempts to seal our historically porous southern border. For First World Christians, solidarity with the

immigrant poor means shifting our focus from how they allegedly impact our society to how our national policies have disrupted *their* lives. Above all, we must seek to know immigrants and refugees not as statistics but as human beings who endure extraordinary hardship and trauma in their struggle just to survive.

“*DICHOZA LA CASA QUE ABRIGA ESTE DIA,*” sings the Mexican side of the liturgy; “*Dichosa esta casa que nos posada*” (“Blessed is the house that today offers protection; blessed is this house that gives us shelter.”) I am shivering now, holding a candle and listening to an activist friend address *the posadas* gathering. Roberto, a farmworker's son, has taken me along this border warzone, and into the canyons of northern San Diego county where farmworkers live in caves and plastic tents, just yards away from affluent condominiums. He labors tirelessly documenting Border Patrol abuses, seeing hundreds of violations each year from the small (verbal abuse, illegal confiscation of documents, deportation of legal residents) to the large (maimings, rapes, deaths in pursuit or custody). His compassion for the “least” is palpable.

Such work invites us to question why borders are so sacred to the modern nation-state. To be sure, issues related to the continuing and often involuntary migration of peoples, and to the geopolitical definition of human communities, are complex in the modern world, and deserve our careful reflection and deliberation. But they are finally theological issues, to which communities of faith must respond. The gospel story of *posadas* calls Christians us to take up the vigil by Emma Lazarus' “Golden Door,” refusing to allow borders to impede the human solidarity to which we are called. Because Jesus could not be clearer. “Nothing from the outside can defile us” (Mk 7:15).

*This article appeared in The Other Side magazine in March-April 1995,  
and was reprinted in edited form in Priests and People (England).*