

“Embracing Catholicism, Embracing the Immigrant”

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Catholicism is not only a religion, but it is also a universal, faithful community that is shared by approximately one billion people throughout the world. In addition to Sacred Scripture and the Body and Blood of Christ, tradition and culture also positively promote religious spirituality and togetherness. This unity has manifested itself in a variety of ways over the centuries. Specifically, since its origins, the Catholic Church in the United States has been dedicated towards nurturing immigrants, which provides a Christ-like example for all future generations of Catholics to follow.

The first Catholic missionaries from Spain arrived in North America in 1492, following Christopher Columbus's discovery of the Americas. They established churches primarily in present-day Florida and California in an effort to extend their religious beliefs and practices to native non-Christians. In 1633, the English colony, Maryland, was established as a safe-haven for practitioners of the Catholic faith. Following the Toleration Act of 1649, Maryland, with the exception of Rhode Island, became the only colony to allow people of all religious backgrounds to practice their faith without persecution. With relative benevolence, the United States was able to continue to foster religious tolerance and cultural diversity to subsequent immigrants.

As the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries commenced, immigrants, primarily those of Irish ethnicity, moved to the United States. While they worked arduously in mines and industrial factories as part of the American working class, they kept a profound respect for tradition, diversity, and religious mysticism. For example, Irish immigrants built churches and schools, which they often dedicated to their patron saint, St. Patrick. Paintings, sculptures and other art forms were integral parts of Irish

heritage, as were religious and cultural holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and St. Patrick's Day, the national holiday of Ireland.

By 1850, a large number of Catholics were living in the United States due to the influx of immigrants. Many Catholics responded compassionately. For instance, two Catholic activists, Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams, founded Hull House in Chicago. The workers at Hull House not only provided food and shelter for the immigrants, but they also provided job-training seminars, childcare and English classes free of charge. Catholic priests and nuns also helped immigrants living in the slums of New York City and Boston. Dorothy Day and Peter Maulin, two other Catholic activists, commenced the Catholic Worker Movement. Among other things, they stressed charitable works of mercy and outreach programs that in turn made positive changes in the way wealthier Americans responded to the impoverished of the United States.

In the new millennium, immigrants have continued to come to the United States in hope of finding a new beginning, just as the first immigrants came in search of a new life. In 2005, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops challenged the United States to respond in a Christ-like way to this new wave of immigrants seeking refuge in the United States. They initiated a program, "Justice for Immigrants: The Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform," and began celebrating National Migration Week to help raise awareness of the immigration situation and to call Catholics to action.

Currently, immigrants are facing new types of hardships that their predecessors did not have, such as extreme border restrictions and scarce visas. Finding adequate housing and financially stable jobs are also part of their daily struggles. Several Catholic organizations are responding to the current immigration situation, such as the Catholic

Legal Immigration Network, that provides legal and social services to immigrants. In some areas of the United States where Spanish is prevalently spoken, masses in Spanish are offered. However, more cultural changes are necessary in order to create a more welcoming environment. The Catechism reminds us, “if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people’s culture, [missionary endeavor] must...continue.” [854]

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, Catholics should be willing to “catch a glimpse of the painful condition of all immigrants,” so that they can “ensure [the immigrants] of a real...inclusion...in their new homeland.”¹ Catholics must preserve the United States’ tradition of equality for future generations by reaching out, like Christ, to those in need of physical, mental and spiritual comforts. In order to truly live as Catholics and to embrace the Gospel to its fullest, Catholics must embrace the weakest in their society, the immigrants.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message, January 14, 2007.

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Most Holy Pope Benedict XVI,

Since its origins, the United States has cultivated a great respect for diversity and religion that has continued to foster its people today. The Spanish, the first European settlers, extended their religious practices to native non-Christians, followed by the English who established Maryland, a colony dedicated towards preserving religious freedom for all people. In the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States welcomed many immigrants from Ireland and other countries abroad. Currently, the Catholic Church in the United States is working to create a more welcoming environment, primarily for Hispanic immigrants. One program, sponsored by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, provides legal and social services for immigrants.

Therefore, it is with honor that I cordially invite you to the United States, a country that has always been dedicated towards welcoming the newcomer. I hope that you will continue to encourage Catholics to “catch a glimpse of the painful condition of all immigrants,” in order to remind us that we cannot truly embrace Catholicism until we have embraced the immigrant. May God continue to bless you in all that you do!

Respectfully yours,
Clarissa Ashley Price