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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

ONE FAMILY UNDER GOD: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON SERVING OUR IMMIGRANT SISTERS AND BROTHERS AS CHRISTIAN SOCIAL WORKERS

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From its inception, a major part of U.S. identity has been that of being a nation of immigrants. Today, the traditional factors of war, human rights abuses and abject poverty have combined with greater protection and assistance under international law, improved means of transportation, and increased capacity for global communication to make the migration of people more possible in our times than ever before. This was evident most recently during the 1990s, when the United States experienced a level of migration not seen since the early twentieth century (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Currently, approximately 20% of the American population is comprised of people born abroad and their children (Berger, 2004). Because many of these immigrants and refugees are vulnerable populations struggling with poverty, mental health issues related to war and other trauma, language and economic barriers, cultural adjustment, and severely damaged social support systems, social workers, with our emphasis on person-in-environment and our attentiveness to the whole person, have a significant role to play in helping them adjust and thrive in their new life. Christian social workers, regardless of whether or not we share the same religious tradition as those whom we serve, have a special gift to offer these communities because of our sensitivity to faith and religious experience, an essential element in the lives of many immigrants and refugees.

Most social workers, while often not feeling adequately prepared, respond compassionately and generously to the new immigrants and refugees in their midst. However, they often must do so in a local and national environment that has become increasingly hostile to those same immigrants. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation has been increasing since the mid-1990s, reaching a peak after the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It has currently been inflamed again as debate rages over

the presence of undocumented immigrants in the United States.¹ What then sustains and informs social workers in their efforts to serve these individuals/families/communities at the micro level and to work for just systemic change at the mezzo and macro level? Fortunately, in addition to the Social Work Code of Ethics, Christian social workers have scripture, theological and sacramental tradition, Catholic/Christian social teaching and personal faith experience to offer them guidance in this effort.

Members of the Body of Christ have the responsibility of “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Gospel” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes/The church in the modern world*, 1965, #4). This article will offer the opportunity to explore how the various elements of scripture and the Christian tradition can inform and guide Christian social workers in their ministry to immigrants and refugees. I will speak out of my Catholic Christian tradition, but all Christian traditions share much in common and each social worker will be able to find in her/his own tradition’s unique elements that speak to this issue. Specifically, we will consider various Scriptural passages, will reflect on Eucharist/communion as a model for our interaction with marginalized immigrants and refugees, and will consider selections of Catholic social teaching related to issues of justice.

Overview of the Immigrant Experience

Immigrants can come to the United States in several ways. Under international law currently applied in the U.S. through the Refugee Act of 1980, immigrants fleeing war, persecution, death, torture or imprisonment in their home countries can seek special protection (INS Asylum Program, 1999). In common usage today, the term refugee is used to designate those who come the United States with their refugee status already approved, often via refugee camps, while the term asylee designates those who enter the U.S. without documentation and then seek formal recognition of their refugee status. This is known as seeking asylum (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Others come as regular immigrants without any special protective status and unlike refugees are currently ineligible for any welfare or medical benefits for their first 5 years in the U.S. Many are actually refugees and have the same special needs but are classified differently because they have been sponsored by family members in family reunification efforts. Others are undocumented immigrants. Approximately 50% of the undocumented immigrants risk the incredible dangers of the border crossings, while the other 50% come legally and overstay their visas (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). While it is true that the majority of the undocumented immigrants are from Mexico and Central America, undocumented immigrants come from throughout the world including our neighbor Canada (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). The undocumented immigrants are not eligible for any assistance other than emergency medical.

New refugees and immigrants in the United States have come from all over the world, the majority from cultures and ways of life very different from our own. Many have suffered much trauma and have risked great danger in their efforts to reach a place of safety, freedom and hope. They have given up the familiar and the beloved in hopes of a better future for themselves and most especially for their children. While social workers and other helping professionals can help them build on that hope and ease the effects of trauma and resettlement, refugees as a group, regardless of country of origin, underutilize social services, especially mental health services, despite high percentages of individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and family tensions (Granski & Carillo, 1997).

Refugees and undocumented immigrants in particular suffer from the effects of trauma. As noted by Brune et al. (2002), the refugee experience of trauma is generally prolonged and repeated, often over years. Thus, given that traumatic experiences have a cumulative effect, it is not surprising that there is a high incidence of post-traumatic disorders in refugees. They further note that the fact that refugee trauma is consciously and purposely inflicted by other human beings further compounds the anguish of the experience. As a participant in Spandl’s (2006) study explained, “*I saw something I didn’t see before in my*

¹ The value/principle of human dignity insists that people in and of themselves cannot be considered “illegal;” only their actions can be described in this way – hence the term “undocumented” instead of “illegal” immigrants.

life. They kill each other – humans. He didn't do anything; he died just like that. I saw many things." Another described her experience this way: *"We don't [have] a job; we don't have a life. Everybody was killed – my relatives, my brother, my family, my cousins – the people all killed. The men they came and they rape the women."* Many undocumented immigrants are robbed, beaten and/or raped on their way to the border and survive dangerous journeys of jumping rides on trains, crossing swollen rivers and passing through the extreme temperatures of the desert.

In addition to looking at past trauma, numerous studies give equal or more weight to the influence of post-migration stressors and resettlement on their experience of adjustment distress. Not only refugees but immigrants from all backgrounds experience some of these intense pressures. Culture shock, changes in food and diet, struggles to learn a new language, separation from family, social isolation, inadequate housing, limited access to community services, decline in socio-economic status, unemployment, discrimination, tremendous fear of being sent back if seeking asylum or here as an undocumented immigrant and "goal-striving stress" are all cited as significant stressors influencing the well-being of immigrants and refugees (Barnes, 2001; Guerin, Abdi, & Guerin, 2003; Kamyra, 1997; Piwowarczyk, 2001; Silveira & Allebeck, 2001; Watters, 2001). Coming to a new country can be very frightening and overwhelming. As a participant in Spandl's (2006) study observed, *"There is too much poor; there is no work; we don't know the language. And the country we don't know and we are scared."* Furthermore, current resettlement policies that stress early financial independence put considerable pressure on immigrants and refugees to obtain employment or attend job training before their language skills are adequate and while there are still unaddressed health and mental health needs. It is also important to be aware that in the current political and economic climate of the United States, refugees are more likely to face racism and hostility. They are blamed for current economic and social problems and accused of using up valuable and scarce resources that should be saved for the needs of "real" Americans (Bemak & Chung, 2002).

A resettlement issue of particular interest to Christian social workers, given the sacredness of marriage and family within our tradition, is the effect of immigration on family systems. Significant struggles arise in the arenas of raising children and sustaining marriages in a new culture. In Spandl's (2006) study, the Somali women interviewed named these as two areas in which the assistance of social workers would be welcomed. According to Kelley (1994), in refugee families, children often learn the new language and culture faster than the parents, resulting in a role reversal and power shift within the family. Parents may feel a loss of control of their children and need help regaining control and their appropriate position in the family. At the same time, youth struggle to balance their dual cultural identity with few role models available to guide them through this complex process. Many immigrant and refugee parents express a deep fear about losing their children to American culture and values. Exacerbating this fear is the reality that most immigrant and refugee families need the income of both parents to make ends meet and thus the women cannot be home supervising their children to the degree they would desire. In the case of the Somali women, they were most concerned about their older children, whom they saw as more likely to rebel and to get into trouble. Furthermore, they indicated that they are raising their children without the extensive social support that was available to them in their home country. Their extended families are now scattered throughout the world rather than living in the same house or neighborhood. Even when they live in the same city, the busy pace of American life, poverty and the difficulties of transportation even across town make extensive familial support difficult (Spandl, 2006).

Complicating the already difficult challenge of raising children in a new culture is the change in marital relationships often experienced upon immigration. Kamyra (1997) observes that in addition to adjusting to the new host culture and environment, "immigrants must reorganize interpersonal relationships" within their own culture as well (p. 155). Guerin et al. (2004) note that while still deeply committed to family, in some cases long separations may lead to strained relationships, including relationships between parents and children and between spouses. In the United States, most immigrant and refugee families experience shifting gender roles. For those refugees from war-torn countries, Sideris (2003) observes that women, often separated from their husbands, are forced to take on roles previously

filled by men in order to survive. She explains, “This capacity to survive resulted in an increase in their sense of strength and resilience, and altered their sense of what it meant to be a woman – autonomous and capable, rather than a vulnerable dependent” (p. 719). As one of the women from Spandl’s (2006) study shared, “*I learned that I would be a hard worker, I can do everything by myself; I can trust myself.*” Resettlement in a country such as the United States, where women are afforded greater rights, further animates the gender role shifts initiated by war. However, an unfortunate parallel to the women’s expansion of freedom, according to Sideris (2003), is that war and resettlement often cause men to lose confidence in their ability to support and protect their families, leaving them without a clear sense of place and purpose in the family.

Not just refugees, however, experience this shift in gender roles. For many immigrant women, the United States affords them greater rights than their home countries. Furthermore, the financial necessity that many women work outside the home exposes them to other points of view and for those from traditional cultures changes their role in the family. Finally, in addition to an increase in personal agency, the availability of welfare assistance makes divorce a realistic option. This increased independence of the women combined with the men’s loss of traditional roles can lead to much marital tension and increased rates of divorce upon resettlement. Many spouses lack the skills and patience needed to resolve the normal tensions of marriage in this new context. Furthermore, traditional supports for couples, such as the intervention of extended family in working through marital disputes, are less available due to both physical distance and the tearing apart of the cultural fabric. In many cases, young couples are especially at risk because they are navigating a new bicultural reality without the clear cultural map their parents had available.

Finally, immigrants and refugees bring with them their religious and spiritual traditions. McMichael (2002), in her study of Somali women, found that faith is interwoven into their daily lives and rhythms in such a way that it becomes a sustaining thread that connects their past to their present and future. For many refugees and immigrants, there is a reclaiming and deepening of faith because their dependence on God is put into stark relief in the face of the precariousness of their circumstances. Furthermore, their faith provides a familiar home, comfort, strength and hope in a challenging time. However, at the same time as faith provides continuity, refugees and immigrants must also reflect on and reformulate their understandings of faith as it is lived out in their new life circumstances (McMichael, 2002). These new circumstances may include encountering difficulty in finding a place to worship, lacking the presence of their spiritual leaders and being expected to worship in English and adapt to the existing reality rather than being invited to help form a new reality if melding with American congregations.

Of particular interest to Christian social workers, various studies have shown that faith gives meaning to immigrant and refugee’s suffering and promotes reliance on God, factors which two empirical studies have shown to protect mental health and promote resilience (Brune et al., 2002; Guerin et al., 2004; Jaransen et al., 2004; McMichael, 2002; Silveira & Allebeck, 2001). Gashaw-Gant (2004) notes that within the African psyche, illness and other problems are understood to have both natural and supernatural causes and suggests creating opportunities for combining traditional and religious healing rituals with western medicine and mental health services. Shweder (as cited in Gashaw-Gant, 2004) contends that historically psychological and social work theories have assumed that “the only effective intervention is by the therapist or the participant, and that ‘divine’ intervention is not to be considered or discussed, even though the healing power of the divine is the highest power for people from many cultures” (p. 111). James and Haskel further assert that the medical model fails to acknowledge the meaning that can be found in suffering, which in the eyes of many religious traditions increases compassion, strengthens character and draws one closer to God and others (cited in Gashaw-Gant, 2004). According to Kamyra (1997), given the positive effect that faith and spirituality can have on mental health, and the preference of many refugees for helping professionals who are attentive to their spiritual well-being and respectful of their beliefs, it behooves social workers to expand the biopsychosocial dimensions of their practice to include attentiveness to the spiritual dimension of their clients as well.

Theological Reflection

Given the realities faced by our immigrant and refugee sisters and brothers, how are we as Christian social workers called to respond? Too often, I believe, the citizens of this country forget that we are a nation of immigrants and that our ancestors left home and country for many of the same reasons that immigrants are coming today. Too often, caught up in our own comfort, we forget our human and spiritual obligation to share our resources and care for those in need. Too often we speak of “them” rather than the “us” of our shared humanity, our shared identity as children of God. Scripture tells us that humans are made in the image and likeness of God (Gn. 1:27). As such, we each carry a divine spark within us and through our various gifts each reflect some aspect of the divine nature. Thus, as Jesus spoke so clearly, what we do to one another, we do to him.

The judgment of the nations: separating the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31-46). Several scripture passages provide guidance for Christian social workers in their relationship with immigrants and refugees. One prominent passage is the story of Jesus separating the sheep and the goats at the last judgment. He tells the sheep that they have inherited the kingdom because they have fed the hungry, clothed the naked and *welcomed the stranger*; inasmuch as they have done it for the least among them, they have done it unto him. The goats, on the other hand, are cast into the eternal fire for not responding to the needy in their midst. By ignoring the needs of the least, they have left Jesus to suffer as well. This passage challenges us to welcome and assist those who are on the margins of society in our times. As articulated by Virgil Elizondo (1983), a Catholic priest and prominent Latino theologian,

Priority is to be given to the ones in greatest need. If we are to follow him [Jesus], we are to freely separate ourselves from whatever separates us from the needy of the world so that we might enter into solidarity with them. To do something for them is to do it for God. The way they are treated, God is treated. Where they are, God is.” (p. 93)

This gospel passage makes it clear that simple things – basic hospitality, compassion, and being neighbor to one another – make all the difference. From this simple knowing of one another, of engaging in relationship, efforts for more systemic justice cannot help but follow.

Isaiah 58. In Isaiah 58, God chastises the people, reminding them that it is not ritual fasting or other superficial religious practices that are desired, but rather, heartfelt works of mercy and justice – actions that restore right relationship with God and with others. Speaking through Isaiah, God says:

Is not this the fast I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer,
you shall cry for help, and [God] will say: Here I am!
. . . Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.
(Is. 58: 6-9, 12, NRSV)

According to J. J. M. Roberts (2001), professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, Isaiah lashes out at the hypocrisy of going through the motions of physical fasting while at the same time engaging in oppressive, self-serving behaviors in other aspects of life. Self-denial of the flesh must be accompanied by the self-denial involved in serving the needs of others and rooting out injustice (p. 136). In considering contemporary life, one can hear this passage as a challenge to the tendency of many Christians to consider weekly or even daily attendance of church services as sufficient for holiness, even while in their business, social, and family interactions they oppress others, perpetuate unjust social systems, and consider the radical call of God's justice as impractical in "real life." God's call is clear. One can only return to right relationship with God by endeavoring to live in right relationship with others as expressed through acts of compassion and efforts toward systemic change that lead to the release of those bound unjustly.

Within the Isaiah text, verse 12 relates poignantly to work with refugees. When this text was written, the Israelites had recently returned to Judah after the Babylonian exile. They returned to land destroyed by invasion, war, and neglect and began the slow process of rebuilding their community, both externally in the rebuilding of their cities and towns, and internally, in the healing of the wounds of exile (Blenkinsopp, 2003, p. 178; Coogan, 2001, pp. 969, 975). Those who come to the United States as refugees have also experienced the destruction of their land by war. Their spirits have been deeply wounded and their sense of identity has been shaken to its core. In working with refugees, one is privileged to serve as a "repairer of the breach" and a "restorer of ruined homesteads" as Isaiah 58:12 describes. Befriending refugees offers the opportunity to help them repair and heal the wounds inflicted by the breaching of their deepest selves, the desecration of their humanity by the violence of war; it allows one to help them create a new homestead in this their new land. It is a great honor and privilege to share in this sacred task.

One family under God. In addition to scripture, Catholic social teaching offers direction and insight into the manner in which we are called to respond to the immigrants and refugees in our midst. Based on scriptural teachings of solidarity with the marginalized, such as those just considered, Vatican Council II proclaimed,

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. (*Gaudium et spes/ The church in the modern world*, 1965, #1)

Not to be reduced to pious platitudes, these church teachings unambiguously call Christians to live out this solidarity with the neighbor through explicit and concrete acts of love: "Everybody should look upon his or her neighbor (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind especially their neighbor's life and the means needed for a dignified way of life" (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes/The church in the modern world*, 1965, #27). The members of the Second Vatican Council went on to say,

There is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every individual, without exception, and to take positive steps to help a neighbor whom we encounter, whether that neighbor be an elderly person abandoned by everyone, a foreign worker who suffers the injustice of being despised, a refugee . . . or a starving human being who awakens our conscience. (*Gaudium et spes/The church in the modern world*, 1965, #27)

The principle of solidarity clarifies who is included in society's membership, defining it in an all-inclusive way as the whole human family regardless of difference. Addressing the depth of those ties, in *On Social Concerns*, Pope John Paul II (1987) stated:

Solidarity...is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. (*Solicitudo rei socialis*, #38)

These scriptural and church teachings enrich and deepen our social work commitment as stated in the *NASW Code of Ethics*: “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (Preamble).

The U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration statement, *One Family Under God* (1995), applies these and other Catholic social teaching principles in a comprehensive way to immigration policy. It underscores the importance of Christian ministry among refugees and immigrants and provides definitive theological and practical guidance for all Christians regarding their interactions with them. It reminds us that our Judeo-Christian history is one of migration – from Abraham and Sarah’s wanderings, to the Exodus, to Mary, Joseph and Jesus’ flight to Egypt, to the missionary travels of Paul and the apostles – and that we are called to treat the stranger among us as Christ himself (p. 2).

In *Strangers no longer: Together in the journey of hope* (2003, Chapter II), the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops articulate specific principles based on gospel values and the tradition of Catholic social teaching regarding the rights of migrants and the appropriate human response. They are worth serious consideration.

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland. The root causes of migration – poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts – must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their family. [This presumes local and global efforts toward economic development, political stability and religious freedom.]
2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. The goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.
3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders; however this right is not absolute. The needs of immigrants must be measured against the needs of the receiving countries. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows. [Currently, although developed countries contribute much of the funding to assist refugees, the world’s poorest countries host the vast majority of the worlds’ refugees (Welcoming Christ in the Migrant, 2005, p. 4).]
4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars or religious or political persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority. [Changes in U.S. immigration law in the mid-nineties removed these protections.]
5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected. Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected.

Reflection on Personal Experience

Each person’s personal experience forms the basis for any reflection in light of the gospel and social work values and ethics. While faith guides and vitalizes my ministry, my ministry also feeds and enriches my faith, helping me to experience faith as concretely coupled to the deep needs of our times. Hans Küng, the internationally renowned German theologian, describes what he names “inductive faith,” in which universal, natural human experiences point to the divine (West, 2004, *Theo 670* course notes). Understood

in this light, the tangible faith experience of interacting with immigrants and refugees has helped root my faith inside me in a way that no outward imposition or rationalization of doctrine ever could.

One of the most touching experiences with immigrants and refugees has been their hospitality and their attention to relationships. When I interviewed Somali women in their homes for my social work clinical research project as part of my MSW program, they unfailingly offered food and drink as an essential part of relationship-building prior to any meaningful sharing. Different from most Americans who would be inclined to get right to the task per the agreement to participate in the study, the Somali women required that a personal relational connection be established, first, through the personal recommendation given me by the cultural broker/interpreter, and second, through the sharing of food and general conversation before beginning the official interview. Again today (January 13, 2008), as I attended the Karen² New Year celebration, their constant attentiveness to the comfort and well-being of their guests was striking. I wondered that they were even able to enjoy their own celebration as they were so busy working to attend to the many American guests they had invited. Yet, the receiving of the food and hospitality by the guests is always equally important. The disappointment on their faces is always evident if one refuses the hospitality and the offer of food. This story has repeated itself over and over in my interaction with immigrants and refugees, in small and large ways.

Eating with the marginalized. (Mt. 9:9-13; Mk. 2:13-17; Lk. 5:27-32). In the story of the call of Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and other sinners. According to Warren Carter (2000), a New Testament scripture scholar at the St. Paul School of Theology, “In the ancient world, meal customs reflected and reinforced hierarchical order, social relations and status,” a system which Jesus rejected by sharing meals with the marginalized and rejected members of his society (p. 219). Instead, he modeled the inclusiveness and “all-embracing and indiscriminate love” of God’s reign, “destroy[ing] all gender, status, class, religious, political, and socioeconomic barriers” (p. 221). Jesus truly enjoyed himself with these less acceptable members of society, cherishing their unpretentious authenticity as he offered the gift of his presence, the gift of relationship as a means of bringing healing to their hurting lives. Matthew was delighted to host Jesus and his disciples, honored that Jesus would risk his social standing to be with him and his friends, curious about who this unusual man was, and full of unspoken and probably unrecognized hope that Jesus might somehow make a difference in their lives.

Considering this passage in light of the table fellowship shared often with immigrants and refugees, I identify with Jesus, knowing that I am an honored guest among marginalized people. Although not despised as “sinners” as were Matthew and his friends, many refugees and immigrants are a marginalized group. They are marginalized in the U.S. due to poverty, culture, race, religion, and gender. At its worst marginalization for them means being despised as foreigners, as being the wrong color or wrong religion, and as being usurpers of resources and benefits meant for U.S. citizens. At its very least they are ignored as irrelevant or objectified as available cheap labor.

Although social workers bring specific skills for helping people, studies have shown that our development of authentic, caring, therapeutic relationships with clients is the single greatest factor influencing healing. Without a strong therapeutic relationship, techniques are ineffective (Asay & Lambert, 1999). As presented in this gospel passage, Jesus acted out of a similar understanding, one that emphasized relationship as the primary means of bringing about healing and the reign of God. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus made visible the relationality inherent in God’s being, which Christians eventually came to understand as the Trinity. John’s gospel (4:16) says, “God is love.” Love is relationship. It does not say that love is “an attitude, affect or property of God,” but rather that love, hence relationship, is God’s essence (Johnson, 1992, p. 228). Because “to love is to be affected” (Mesle, 1993, p. 29), God was willing to enter

² The Karen people are an ethnic minority group in Burma (also known as Myanmar) who have recently begun arriving in the U.S. in substantial numbers. These refugees have fled both political and religious persecution in their home country. As recent television reports of pro-democracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks suggest, the political repression in Burma is severe. The Karen are doubly targeted because most are Christians, converted by Baptist missionaries in the past, in what is a predominantly Buddhist nation.

into the messiness of interacting with humans, including the marginalized members of society, and did so in a very explicit way in the incarnation of Jesus. As followers of God in Jesus, we must do the same.

In my interviews with the Somali women, most memorable was the celebratory religious meal shared with several of the study participants. Although I could not communicate directly with several of the women due to the language barrier and many times could not follow the conversation, I was very aware that my mere presence was understood as honoring their culture and faith (Muslim) and our shared humanity. I represented the larger society, validating their presence in our midst. In so doing, I believe I was following in Jesus' footsteps, bringing his presence and healing power into their midst. With Matthew and his friends, Jesus recognized that acknowledgement of their humanity spoke more to them of God's love and created the greatest potential for growing into the people they were meant to be than any preaching ever could. Once in relationship, his words and presence could touch them more deeply and bring about the restructuring of their lives towards greater life and love. Once in relationship, the Somali women could share with me their stories of trauma, struggles, mental health issues and beliefs, trusting that I would use their stories for the greater good of their community to further bridge the gap between them and the larger society. Once in relationship through the sharing of a meal, my listening presence, my interest in their lives and stories could bring healing to them, and their trust and sharing could touch and convert my heart as well. Together we could grow in God's love, forming community across our cultural and religious differences, finding common ground in our shared humanity and our love for God. We experienced what Elizondo (1983) describes as the universal language of *agape*. "It is the language of selflessness in the service of others, the language of the radical acceptance and love of the other as other. It is a language of the heart, communicating directly with others regardless of human difference" (p. 83).

Eucharist. It is impossible as a Catholic Christian to reflect on the symbolism and meaning of a shared meal without also considering its ties to the sacred table fellowship of the Eucharist (communion). As disciples of Jesus, Christians are called to be the Body of Christ in the world, to be Eucharist. It is our privilege and responsibility to give flesh and substance to the gospel. Monika Hellwig (1999), internationally renowned theologian and author, names hospitality as the central theme of the Eucharist, saying that first and foremost it is the "celebration of divine hospitality made present to us in the person of Jesus" (p. 83) and is "shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God" (p. 18). She describes the Eucharist as "an action which addresses every form of inhospitality in our world, confronting it with the image of what might be and ought to be" (p. 83). This understanding of Eucharist beautifully encompasses my various experiences of table fellowship with immigrants and refugees.

The food shared with me by refugees and immigrants symbolizes their deeper offer of hospitality in which they open their lives to me. I am nourished by their willingness to trust me, the depth of their stories, and their sincerity of heart. They nourish my heart, affirm my gifts, witness to the strength of the human spirit, and deepen my faith and hope in God. In turn, I nourish them. In listening to their stories I affirm and validate their experiences. I seek to help them and their communities, not only through providing services, but also by building bridges between them and the larger American community. However, I also nourish and strengthen their sense of self-worth and belonging by being willing to also receive from them, by asking for their help at times, and by inviting their contributions. Very often they are on the receiving end of services. Human dignity and relationship require mutuality. Refugees and immigrants need opportunities to give back to the people and society that have helped them. One of the greatest gifts we can give is to nourish the spirit of another through being willing to graciously, sincerely and gratefully receive from them. If we are unable or unwilling to do this, then our own giving can become a form of dominance and control. We are the ones in charge of the resources. It is no longer sharing and thus it is no longer Eucharist.

Hellwig (1999) observes, "One person is the sustenance of another wherever one rescues another from despair and offers something for which to live"(p. 24). Although I minister with the hope of freeing refugees and immigrants from the distress and discouragement that is so often a part of their resettlement experience, unexpectedly, they too bring relief to some of my own discouragement and distress. When I look at our country I frequently despair at the inhospitable, anti-immigrant rhetoric and punitive legislation

occurring in our so-called “nation of immigrants,” our aggressive military campaigns that not only destroy life through direct killing, but also by taking resources from basic human needs, our materialism, the racism and discrimination embedded in our society, the economic exploitation by our corporations of poorer countries and peoples and our destruction of the environment. However, the refugees and immigrants among whom I minister often offer me hope and a renewed vision for our country. In spite of their struggles in adjusting to life in this country, they name benefits they have experienced as part of their new life in the United State. They speak of freedom – political, religious and gender-related freedom. In spite of my frustration with the strong anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in our country, they have taught me that most of the nearby countries in which they initially resettled would never have given them the opportunity for citizenship or even permanent residency. Furthermore, while I decry the ever-eroding benefits that help refugees get started in this country, in many other countries, including wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia, they receive no benefits at all. Finally, in spite of the racism and discrimination so embedded in our societal structures, some Somali women have shared how Americans have taught them to learn to live respectfully with diverse people, and they hope they can bring that lesson to their own people who are deeply divided by clan affiliation (Spandl, 2006). This is not to say that we can sit complacently and say that compared to some other countries what we are doing is enough. We have our own ideals to live up to. Still, they reminded me that our country and culture does have good and wonderful things to offer, giving me renewed energy for building on and sharing more freely what we already have and for opposing those forces that would dismantle the blessings of our system. In fact, in the meeting of two or more cultures, in the mutual sharing of hope, there is a unique expression of Eucharist. In knowing one another we have the opportunity to be transformed in the sharing, to learn from the best of each culture, to attempt to integrate it into our lives, and in the process to become more loving, and for me as a Christian, more Christlike.

You Are Sent

According to Virgil Elizondo (1983), discipleship is not a “passive privilege, but an active mission.” We are not invited to relax and bask in pleasure of God’s love, but rather to bring that love to fruition on earth (p. 104). In the document *On Social Concern*, Pope John Paul II appealed to Christians:

Be convinced of the seriousness of the moment...fulfill your commitment by the way you live, by the use of your resources, by your civic activity, by contributing to economic and political decisions, and by personal involvement in national and international undertakings.
(*Solicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, #47).

In *The Hundredth Year*, Pope John Paul II was equally clear: “The social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all a basis and a motivation for action (*Centesimus annus*, 1991, #57). This begs the question: Having reflected on the experience of ministering among immigrants and refugees in light of scripture, Catholic social teaching, and Eucharist, what are Christian social workers called to? How are we to live differently because of this experience? First and foremost, we must educate ourselves about the issues related to migration and the experiences of immigrants and refugees and then we must educate others in all the venues available to us. We are called to create bridges between immigrants and refugees and the various people, groups and organizations in our midst. We must advocate for change at local, national and international levels, both politically and within our local agency programs. Catholic social teaching suggests that Christians are called to confront the unjust social and political systems that oppress the marginalized. In *Justice in the World*, the Church proclaims, “Love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor (World Synod of Bishops, *Justicia in mundo*, 1971, #34). “Justice...has implications for the way the larger social, economic, and political institutions of society are organized” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, # 71). Contrary to an individualistic morality, Elizondo (1983) asserts, “The disciples of Jesus cannot be content with welcoming others and doing good for others. They must join him in his struggle against the root and multiple causes of oppression. It is not sufficient to do good and avoid evil:

the disciple must do good and *struggle against evil*" (p. 72). In the context of Eucharist, the hunger of the marginalized of the world for human dignity, freedom, justice and peace must be met (Hellwig, 1999, p. 16).

Over the past year several legislative proposals containing punitive immigration legislation have been introduced. Some proposed legislation threatens to put social workers, church staff, health care professionals, teachers and others who may serve undocumented immigrants as part of their ministry, in jail for "aiding and abetting" their "crime." Are we willing to go to jail for refusing to stop meeting the basic human needs of undocumented immigrants? My personal initial heart response is a resounding and defiant, "yes!" Should it become reality, I can only pray to have that courage. Other related policies, such as healthcare, welfare, affordable housing, and mental health funding also require attention if we are to advocate for refugees and immigrants. All this requires the ever-precious commodity of time and can be frustrating due to the slow pace of change and the political maneuvering involved. It is difficult to sustain. Yet, who else will be the voice of the refugees and immigrants? Who else is called to work for justice on their behalf? Who else, if not me, if not us, is called to live out the covenant to be Eucharist to them, to assuage their hunger, respond to their need?

Even though it is slow and frustrating, in some ways political action can be easier because it feels a little removed from one's day to day existence. More difficult I believe is the call to stand up for justice and human dignity when family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and/or fellow church members are condemning immigrants or making racist statements. These are relationships that affect one on a daily basis. It requires even greater courage to speak truth in love to these. Yet the God's call is clear. As noted in *On Social Concern*, "One may sin by greed and the desire for power, but one may also sin in these matters through fear, indecision and cowardice!" (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, # 47). As Christian social workers we are challenged to risk direct, respectful confrontation more often around these issues and to be willing to struggle with the relational tension that may result. It can be expected that members of the body of Christ will have differences of opinion in the application of Gospel principles to this issue. At such moments, it is essential to make respectful efforts to find points of agreement which can be acted upon. Under no circumstances are Christians to "wear themselves out in interminable arguments, and, under pretext of the better or the best, omit to do the good that is possible and therefore obligatory" (John XXIII, *Mater et magistra*, 1961, # 238).

One of the gifts of social work is that it recognizes that one must attend to the whole person, their biological, psychological, and social dimensions as well as the larger systemic issues that impinge upon them. However, for many decades social work has neglected to acknowledge the spiritual dimension and its role in a client's life and healing. In so doing, social workers have no doubt at times created obstacles to a person's healing and missed opportunities to help clients further integrate their physical, psychological and spiritual selves. In more recent years, there has been a growing awareness in the field of the need to attend to the spiritual dimension of clients' lives, not to replace their religious leaders and spiritual guides, but to consider spirituality's role in their overall well-being. This movement is still young and most new social workers are not yet being prepared to address this dimension in a way appropriate to social work practice. Yet, as studies have shown, they will have clients who will bring these issues whether they are prepared or not (Canda & Furman, 1999). Many refugees and immigrants consistently name faith and spirituality as integral to their lives and key to their emotional health and well-being. As Christian social workers we have a distinct responsibility to increase awareness among social workers of the importance of attending to the biopsychosocial *and spiritual* dimensions of their clients' lives

Conclusion

Members of the Body of Christ have the responsibility of "reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Gospel" (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes/The church in the modern world*, 1965, #4). One means of doing this is to engage in theological reflection in which a person reflects on and interprets a situation or experience in light of the Gospel and other relevant sources and then discerns appropriate action. In this paper I have attempted to follow this framework of "see, judge, act" by

considering the immigrant and refugee experience as articulated in research and in my person experience and then considering this experience in light of scripture, the sacrament of Eucharist, and Catholic social teaching. Each of these has led to the themes of love, justice, and hospitality. Affirming the efforts many of us have already made in living out these themes in relation to immigrants and refugees, this reflection nonetheless calls us, and all Christians, to yet more. In speaking of the poor, Pope John Paul II indicated the radical transformation Christians are yet called to, and to which they in turn must call society. This statement could equally be applied to immigrants and refugees, poor or not:

A change of mentality is needed, no longer seeing the poor as a burden, or as intruders trying to profit from others, but as people seeking to share the goods of the world so that we can create a just and prosperous world for all (*Centesimus annus/The hundredth year*, 1991, #28).

One could lose hope given the enormity of the needs and depth of transformation needed in the world. However, scripture is clear – every small act of love, justice, and/or hospitality matters and helps to further the reign of God. Like Christ, we too experience God’s power to bring life from death. As the Body of Christ, we are now partners with God in nurturing life. We are now Christ’s body on earth, his hands, his feet. As he feeds us in the Eucharist with his body, so we too become bread for others. Through acts of love, justice, and generous hospitality towards all, especially the marginalized, we help to further the reign of God. This is both our privilege and our responsibility.

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