

# MIGRATION

## A Call to Compassion and Transformation

NOVEMBER 2, 2006 FEAST OF ALL SOULS

**To our brothers and sisters in Francis, Clare and Christ:**

### Peace and all good!

From October 29-November 3, 2006, we who serve as directors and animators of the Justice, Peace and Ecology/Integrity of Creation/ Safeguarding of Creation (JPE/JPIC/JPSC) ministries in the provinces of the Franciscan First Order met at Holy Cross Retreat in Mesilla Park, NM, to engage in a dialogue on the issue of migration. We met in the Borderland, a unique region that is neither totally of the United States, nor totally of Mexico. While most of what is said in this paper focuses on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, many of the dynamics and issues are applicable to other groups of migrants in other regions, e.g., the Turks in Germany, the Islamic groups outside of Paris, the Mexican migrant workers flown in and out of Canada at night, displacement of peoples in Darfur and in the Shiite and Sunni areas of Iraq, etc.

### Borderland Ministry

The Borderland is a unique place, not only geographically, but culturally, economically and politically. It is a place on the edge of cultures, a place where the dreams of a better life and new opportunities collide with the harsh realities of an economic system that places the migrant at the very bottom of the ladder—and very often, does everything it can to keep him there. It is often a sort of limbo, a place where migrants may find it nearly impossible to leave—and in many cases, be reunited with families



PHOTO BY PHIL KELLY, OFM Conv

Mexican and U.S. bishops show solidarity at the end of the Border Mass near El Paso, TX, Nov. 2, 2006. Hundreds of people gathered on both sides of the border as the Bishops celebrated Mass, alternating between English and Spanish words, prayers and songs. Participants held crosses containing the names of people who had died crossing the border, and prayed for compassionate immigration reform.

and friends—a place where one's life is in a perpetual holding pattern. But this holding pattern offers a very thin safety net for those who remain. Very often, migrants live in fear and isolation. These brothers and sisters must also contend with the projected fears of those who do not offer them welcome; those who perceive the migrants as a threat to a purely "American" way of life. As our discussions unfolded, we realized that the "border" is more than just the geographical space where different countries touch. The border can be any place where two cultures find themselves interfacing with each other, relying on each other in an

uneasy and unequal relationship. Those on the lower end of this relationship live a sort of shadow existence, while those on the upper end of the relationship do everything within their power to retain the upper hand.

### Washing the Feet of the Poor

Our first point of entry into this issue was listening to the respective experiences of two Franciscans who minister on the border. Frank Probst, OFM, is a member of the OFM Interprovincial Border Project in Socorro, TX, who volunteers at Annunciation House, a house of hospitality in the El Paso area. Frank



Frank Probst, OFM, and Nancy Hansen, SSSF, share their experiences of ministry at the border.

spoke of the variety of people who come to their door: people from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other places. El Paso is a stopping point—and for some a termination point—in their journey north. Some people are seeking work because there is none in their homeland; others come in the hope of joining family members. Fear is a common theme in their stories: fear of the unknown, fear of deportation, fear of failure in their quest for a better life or to find family members. Frank also visits the Coralon (Big Corral) Detention Center, which is essentially a prison for those caught after a second attempt at illegal entry into the U.S. People can languish in detention centers such as these for years without any contact with family or any progression of their case through the legal system. In listening to the migrants' stories, Frank is amazed at their great faith. "It's a real experience of washing the feet of the poor," Frank said.

Nancy Hansen, SSSF, ministers at Southwest Key, a shelter for undocumented minors. Nancy spoke of how much of this wave of migration is a byproduct of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). These two trade

agreements have made it impossible for many to earn a living through farming in their homelands. For the sake of survival, men, women, and even children go to great risks and incur great debt in order to find a place in the U.S. The goal of Southwest Key is to reunite the minors in their care with their families as they await a court date, and to provide a safe environment as they wait. Another issue that affects the border is human trafficking, which has disastrous consequences for its victims. The Third Order Values of Contemplation, Poverty, Compassion and Humility come to mind in her experience here. "Compassion is what I meet so often." Offering hospitality and welcome to those who come, as well as receiving from them their stories and their faith, are key parts of what keeps her going. "This experience has called me to a deeper appreciation of material poverty and how I am called to live that out."

### Migrants Experience Many Hardships

After this introduction to some of the border issues, we heard from Friar Rigoberto Caloca-Rivas, OFM, who serves as executive director of the Multicultural Institute (MI) in Berkeley, California. The focus of most of Rigoberto's input was on the MI's

work with day laborers in the San Francisco-Oakland area. The MI's work is not limited to the day laborers themselves (the MI works among the laborers on the street, and not in a labor hall). The Institute also creates partnerships and relationships with civil and law-enforcement authorities as well as members of the business community. It assists the workers in formulating protocols for hiring of the laborers and provides educational outreach to them.

Rigoberto highlighted the toll that migration takes on the laborers themselves and their families back home. Loneliness and a feeling of isolation are challenges for the workers. (It is especially challenging for the migrants from Guatemala, many of whom don't speak Spanish.) There is also the added burden of paying off any debt the workers may have incurred to come to the U.S., as well as sending money back to their families. (Many of these small communities in the workers' mother countries rely heavily on the monies sent back home by family members working abroad.) Most migrants come north with the expectation that they will return to their home country in two years; the reality is that it often takes at least two years to clear their debt. Migration is not limited to the U.S.; migration to Canada has increased dramatically since NAFTA



Rigoberto Caloca-Rivas, OFM, shares information on the Multicultural Institute in the Oakland-San Francisco area.

and CAFTA. Nor is this migration limited to people coming from Latin America, but from Asia, Africa and Europe as well.

### Early Friars were Immigrants

Our other major presenter, Friar Jack Clark Robinson, OFM, gave us an historical perspective on migration and the coming of the friars to North America in his presentation: “Franciscans, Immigrants & America’s Original Sins: Racism, Prejudice and Xenophobia.” The initial presence of the friars in North America was under imperial auspices, either Spain or France, but with the decline of these imperial powers, the population of the friars also declined almost to the point of non-existence.

The next wave of Franciscan presence in the North American Continent was due to decidedly different circumstances. In these instances, the friars were often a part of an oppressed minority themselves—as in the case of the German friars fleeing the Kulturkampf—or they were accompanying groups, such as the Irish or Polish, who had fled their homelands because of economic disaster (e.g. the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s, the difficult political and economic situations in what is now Eastern Europe). With the arrival of large numbers of Catholic immigrants there was a hostile and fearful reaction in the U.S. These immigrants were perceived as “foreign” and a threat to the predominant Protestant culture of the country.

American bishops approached Franciscans about coming to serve the immigrants under their care. Religious communities in Europe were a bit reluctant to send their men to this new land, where religious life would not initially be observed in the setting of large, stable communities, with regular hours for prayer, work and quiet. “The friars came to America as poor immigrants, serving poor immigrants, without patrons of any sort, except a few bishops who were as short of money as they were,” says Jack. The risks that these Franciscan men (and many more



Jack Clark Robinson, OFM, presents his findings of the history of the friars in the U.S.

communities of Franciscan women) undertook to bring a Franciscan presence to the immigrant communities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly evokes comparisons to the risks that migrants of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century take to find their way away from the violence, drought and economic or political upheaval in their native countries.

Sadly, the current hype about migration and the so-called “solutions” to the challenges of migration (e.g. the border fence, the criminalization of the non-documented migrant, the threat of massive deportations, etc.) eerily mirrors the migration “solutions” of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### It's About Transformation

A key image to consider in migration is **transformation**, the transformation of cultures as migrant communities begin to influence and enrich the culture of the receiving nation, and the transformation of the culture—for good or ill—of the nation that they leave behind. Families, too, are transformed, when they must endure the long separation of one or more members from the family (sometimes, tragically, when a migrant is killed, or when he or she abandons the family in the home country for a new relationship or family in the receiving country). In communal religious life, a

transformation of the cultures of our communities occurs as a host nation or region accepts more and more members from migrant communities. It is interesting to note that in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the presence of the First Order was nearly extinguished, a new wave of Franciscans from a variety of nations came to spread the Gospel and minister to the burgeoning migrant communities. For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with declining numbers of members in communal religious life, could this new wave of migration pose an opportunity for rebirth and transformation?

With **transformation** comes the challenge of naming and facing our **fears** as something old, familiar and perhaps comfortable, but must give way to something new, unknown, and potentially life-giving. It is also a time for us to find ways to creatively listen to and to address the fears of those who are responding negatively, sometimes violently, to the new realities of migration. How can we, as preachers of the Good News, frame this new reality in terms that would be less threatening and more engaging? How can we be bridge builders between these two groups?

As Rigoberto said, “We believe in a God of life; a God who shares life abundantly with all of us.” A mantra



Friars talk with Mexican people before Border Mass

we often hear as Catholics in America is the promotion of a “culture of life.” Can we not seize this theme and expand upon its richness to promote a culture of life and a quality of life for the migrant—and for those who fear the migrant? Can we frame this reality not from the perspective of fear and suspicion, but as another moment of evolution in our story as a people?

### Questions for Reflection

- What migrants or immigrants have you known? What is their story?
- What attitude(s) exist in your friary or household? Are immigrants seen as a threat, people in need, brothers and sisters, etc.?
- What’s the difference between

migrants and immigrants?

Friars from Ohio living in New Mexico: Is that a type of migration?

Friars from Kentucky who live in Zambia the rest of their lives: Are they émigrés from the U.S. and therefore immigrants to Zambia?

- What is the climate of reception/rejection of (im)migrants in your town?
- What effects of NAFTA and CAFTA have you seen in the town where you live?

### Recommendations for Action

#### For Franciscans

- Learn our own individual and community immigrant history

- Educate ourselves on migration issues today
- Promote constructive dialogue and advocacy for a just immigration system

### For Leadership (Ministers and Councils)

- Commit to inter-Franciscan study days on the theme of migration
- Free up personnel to work in this area

### For Animators

- Encourage Franciscans and others to tell their stories about migration/immigration on recollection or study days
- Develop/distribute a list of resources including prayer services/preaching guides on the migration theme
- Use province/congregation newsletters to share articles on migration
- Use social justice "inserts" in bulletins

—We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Bob Roddy, OFM CONV., the secretary for our gathering and primary author of this document.

### Resources

Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope: <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/>

USCCB: <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/>

Vatican: [http://vatican.mondosearch.com/search\\_en.aspx?query=migration&x=16&y=11](http://vatican.mondosearch.com/search_en.aspx?query=migration&x=16&y=11)

Franciscans International: <http://www.franciscansinternational.org/issues/migration.php>

JustFaith: <http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/justfaith/what/faq.cfm>

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good:

<http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/catholic-social-teaching/>

National Farm Worker Ministry: Ph: 314-726-6470 or [www.nfwm.org](http://www.nfwm.org)

NAFTA: <http://www.pcusa.org/trade/nafta.htm>

CAFTA: <http://www.pcusa.org/trade/cafta.htm>

Teamsters on CAFTA: <http://www.teamster.org/action/political/cafta.asp>

Additional resources from Jack Clark Robinson, OFM, can be obtained from the friars listed in the boxes on the right or from a First Order Justice and Peace animator.

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