



Part One on  
Immigration:  
Welcoming the  
Stranger

Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles provokes a re-thinking of one of our most sensitive political issues in his new book, *Immigration and the Next America*. In this column and the next I want to share with you some of the thoughts he has provoked in me.

The problem of migration comes to light very early in the pages of the Bible. Expelled from the Garden, Adam and Eve leave Paradise behind in the first emigration. Not many chapters later Abraham sets out from his father's country to take up life as a nomadic immigrant in Canaan. His great-grandsons—the children of Jacob—migrate to Egypt to escape famine. Centuries later their descendants leave that country to escape slavery. They follow a wandering migratory trail through the desert to the Promised Land of freedom. A millennium later Joseph and Mary migrate in haste to Egypt to escape Herod's menacing reach for the newborn. Upon the tyrant's death the Child and his parents make yet another migrant's journey to Nazareth and the chance to make a life for themselves. Later, when the adult Jesus describes the Last Judgment to his disciples, he speaks out of his lived experience of emigration and immigration: "I was a stranger, and you *welcomed* me." No doubt Mary and Joseph had told him about the difference that welcome made in their lives.

Christians need to keep this biblical background in mind as our national debate over immigration unfolds. In Archbishop Gomez's words, "we care for the immigrant because Jesus commanded us to. Catholics must defend immigrants if we are going to be worthy of the name Christian." That is what our tradition has challenged us to do from the beginning. In the first centuries after Jesus, Archbishop Gomez notes, "To be a Christian was to practice hospitality toward the stranger."

What does that hospitality demand of us today? How are we to come to the defense of the immigrant? First of all, we must recognize "the stranger's" claim on our care, but our "welcome" should be extended in light of the common good of the whole society. "The natural right to immigration flows from the basic human right to life," Archbishop Gomez writes; yet "Catholic social doctrine on immigration also recognizes that governments have the duty to control migration into their countries and defend their borders." They should take account of "immigration's impact on their domestic economies and national security" and "set reasonable limits on who they allow to cross their borders" and "require reasonable documentation" from those who do.

Our obligation to welcome the stranger, then, does not automatically lead to obvious conclusions on public policy. In contrast to the clear and unquestionable response of Catholic conscience to the issue of abortion, Archbishop Gomez points out, "there is no single authentic 'Catholic' position on immigration." The issues are complex and much disputed.

There is room for conscientious disagreement.

But perhaps honest wrestling with our disagreements can bring us to greater—and politically effective—agreement. In my next column I will reflect with you on Archbishop Gomez's effort to help us move in that direction.