

The following is a response to the statement on immigration issued in November 2007 by the Bishops of Maryland “**Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration**”. With their statement, the Bishops have invited us, laity and clergy alike, to reflect on this delicate issue. These are my personal reflections, which I share as food for thought, with the hopes of promoting intelligent dialogue. I have included the document first to facilitate reflection, followed by the letter and document sent to all three Bishops of Maryland. May the Lord bless our efforts at probing what He asks of us in fraternal charity.

Fr. Dominique Peridans

## Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration

### A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland

November 2007

Increasingly, immigration is moving to the center of the public debate, not only in the halls of Congress and in Annapolis and other state capitals, but also in our neighborhoods, schools, churches and homes. Too often, discussions are marked by tension and confusion; at least as often, they are accompanied by a sincere longing to understand...and to be understood. Questions of legality, economics and the mix of cultures often dominate the immigration debate. As Catholics, we must move past divisions and remain focused on the dignity of the human person and the welfare of families.

We therefore urge Maryland Catholics to consider prayerfully the question of immigration, including illegal immigration. The rule of law must be respected. The discussion, however, cannot end there. Undocumented immigrants are persons with dignity - a reality that obliges us to learn about the immigration system, understand the motives for migration, and consider the needs of individuals and families. Our American ideals call us to participate in the public debate; our Catholic faith urges us to do so with charity.

All people have the right to have their basic needs met in their homelands. When the means to fulfill those needs do not exist at home, people have the right to seek them abroad. (1) At the same time, sovereign nations have the right to control their borders, provided the regulations promote the common good of our universal human family. Not surprisingly, these two rights may conflict. When they do, receiving nations with the ability to accommodate migrants are urged to respond with generosity so individuals have the opportunity to meet their basic needs and so families remain united.

[This teaching](#) flows not only from our profound respect for the human person and families, but also from Sacred Scripture. Strangers and sojourners, as St. Paul calls them, appear on the biblical scene in Genesis and remain prominent throughout the Old Testament. They are regularly referenced along with widows and orphans as vulnerable persons who must be treated with justice and compassion.

In the New Testament, we encounter our faith's most precious migrants - the Holy Family. St. Matthew's Gospel recounts the flight of St. Joseph, the Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus into Egypt to escape the wrath of a jealous king: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph ... are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil." (2)

In the Church, a universal body united through Christ, all find a home. Illegal entry is not condoned, but undocumented immigrants are embraced. "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters." (3)

The history of the Church in the United States compels us to care in a unique way for the welfare of today's immigrants. Our immigrant ancestors helped build the Church here and helped establish a thriving American political system. The first American citizen to become a saint - [Frances Xavier Cabrini](#) - was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the universal patroness of immigrants. Catholic immigrants of every generation have experienced discrimination and intolerance at the hands of those who arrived before them. In the 1600s and 1700s, Maryland Catholics were denied the right to vote, hold public office and celebrate Mass in a church. "No Irish Need Apply" was a staple of employment ads in the 19th and 20th centuries. Descendants of enslaved Africans continue to suffer the

bitter fruits of slavery and segregation. Today, like their immigrant predecessors, Latinos often are the objects of suspicion, intolerance and discrimination.

Maryland Catholics should welcome discussion of immigration and the challenges it can present. We must also recognize distinctions in the debate: The legality of a person's entry into the United States is one issue; our response to him now that he's here is a separate one. The former is the government's responsibility; the latter is also ours. When we exercise that responsibility, we should keep in mind the command of the Lord in the Old Testament: "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt." (4)

The Catholic Church reaches out to migrants in many ways. Catholic dioceses and parishes throughout the world strive to meet not only the spiritual needs, but also the basic human needs, of all people. Catholic Relief Services, headquartered in Baltimore, assists 80 million people worldwide, including many who have been displaced by war, genocide and the threat of starvation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops works for a just federal immigration policy and promotes economic initiatives that help people stay in their homelands. In Maryland, immigrants are served through the good work of organizations like the [Hispanic Apostolate](#) in Baltimore, the Spanish Catholic Center in Langley Park, and the [Seton Center](#) in Princess Anne.

The Church's work at all these levels is essential, but so too are the work and words of individual Catholics. Marylanders of good will must come together to honestly, respectfully, and prayerfully discuss their concerns about immigration. These discussions may not produce a change in national policy or impact the numbers or legal status of immigrants in our communities, but they will help us find local solutions to local challenges. Most importantly, they will help neighbors - citizens and documented and undocumented immigrants alike - see Christ in each other.

To facilitate these vital conversations, we commend to you four simple informational pieces produced by the Maryland Catholic Conference. These documents - focusing on the [process](#), [history](#), [economics](#) and [root causes](#) of immigration - are intended to foster thoughtful discussion and have been made available to all parishes. These resources and others may be found at [www.mdccathcon.org](http://www.mdccathcon.org). We hope you take advantage of them and pray that this season may produce a harvest of goodwill and fraternal charity among all who call or seek to call the United States home.

Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien  
Archbishop of Baltimore

Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl  
Archbishop of Washington

Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli  
Bishop of Wilmington

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- (1) *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, a pastoral statement concerning migration from the bishops of the United States and Mexico, 2005.
- (2) *Exsul Familia*, Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, 1952.
- (3) *Undocumented Migrants*, Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996.
- (4) Leviticus 19:34.

**Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien, Archbishop of Baltimore**

**Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington**

**Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli, Bishop of Wilmington**

Your Eminence,

Please allow me to respond filially and fraternally to your recent statement on immigration: **“Where All Find a Home: A Catholic response to Immigration”**. Presuming that time (or rather, the lack thereof) would make reading a longer reflection difficult, allow me to summarize in this “cover letter” a few of my concerns, which I share as a priest, as a Christian, as a citizen, and as a child of (Belgian) immigrants. These concerns are articulated in greater depth in the pages that follow.

- A seemingly simplistic passage is made from the mandate to love (which, of course, includes the mandate to “welcome the stranger”) to public policy, as though “catholicity of heart” immediately translates into open borders. The statement gives no tools for discernment, because the important distinctions between a philosophical perspective and a theological perspective are not made.
- There is an acknowledgment of the need for law (“Illegal entry is not condoned”), but, in the same breath, practically speaking, such respect for law is disregarded (“but undocumented immigrants are embraced”). Indeed, the qualification “undocumented” – as distinguished from *illegal* – is ambiguous for, as mainstream media seems so often to try to do in using the former, it implies that the distinction between “legal” and “illegal”, when it comes to immigration, is morally irrelevant.
- Little mention is made of the common good of the *national* family, only of the universal human family, when an important discussion needs to be had regarding the reality of a sovereign state.
- No mention is made of how much the statement is authoritative, or how much the statement is opinion.
- No mention is made of the current imbalance in immigration, i.e. the fact that 80% of current immigrants are “Hispanic”.

I very much look forward to hearing from you, with the hope that I grow in my perspective, and can encourage and participate in – in whatever way possible – sound and charitable dialogue on this important issue.

With the assurance of my prayer for you and your ministry, I am

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Dominique Peridans

## *A philosophy of immigration and a theology of immigration*

The question of immigration is one that I have pondered at length, encouraged to do so by life in a bi-lingual (French-English) home, and, later, by seven years of ministry in Laredo, Texas (1996-2003), the busiest port between the United States and Mexico. In reference to the Bishops' statement, then, please allow me now to share with utter simplicity some of the fruit of my reflection on this issue.

The Bishops' statement is a rather *general* statement, so general that it becomes vague, such that many key questions are left untreated, and, dare I say with all due respect, few tools are given for healthy, wise, and thus truly compassionate discernment. Too many important distinctions are missing. Catholics need not only to be encouraged to love, but to be given tools for the discernment of *how to love* intelligently and respectfully.

The statement, and those who read it, would be served well if a more explicitly philosophical perspective were articulated, one that is clearly communicated as such. The issue of immigration is for Christians also a *philosophical* one, without which perspective the Church contributes to the tensions and confusion. The philosophical perspective is the one that allows us to dialogue in the political arena, and is the only one that can be used to forge public policy. Maryland Catholics ought to be urged not only "to consider prayerfully the question of immigration", but to consider *philosophically* the question of immigration, that is, with sound and thoughtful consideration based on the human reality of the common good. Not to do so is to fall into a form of *fideism*, that is to say, to eliminate the role of reason in rightly ordering the sphere of the "authentically secular" (as Pope Benedict calls it), making, for example, a "facile move from Bible quoting to public-policy prescription" (to quote Fr. John Neuhaus in his critique of Cardinal Mahoney's immigration stance<sup>1</sup>), against which the Tradition of the Church, (most recently, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI) cautions Catholics. Indeed, in the Bishops' statement, there are abrupt shifts from philosophical consideration to theological consideration and back, with no mention of the distinctions between the two. There is suggestion of passing from the "universality" of love (to which the Holy Spirit indeed calls us) to a public policy of limitless welcome of immigrants. Paragraph five of the statement typifies this, and leaves the reader wondering on which foot he or she is to dance:

**In the Church, a universal body united through Christ, all find a home. Illegal entry is not condoned, but undocumented immigrants are embraced. "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters."**

The divisions regarding immigration in the public forum, to which the Bishops' statement alludes, in fact, stem from fundamentally differing *philosophical perspectives* of

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<sup>1</sup> "Who Speaks for the Church?", First Things, June 15, 2007

community. We indeed have two fundamentally different philosophical perspectives: that of the legitimacy of a sovereign state whose common good must be protected and promoted (and, of course, in which increasing numbers can participate), and that of the *il*-legitimacy of a sovereign state, an increasingly popular perspective in certain circles of Western civilization, which underlies the promotion of the elimination of borders. The statement seems to suggest that, as Christians, we ought perhaps to embrace the latter perspective, a perspective which is, again, philosophically unsound, for it disrespects the reality of the political community.

The human family is the basic cell of society, and thus the first analogue for trying to understand the nation, that is to say, the sovereign state, and for trying to understand the question of the common good. Quite simply, what is true of the family is *analogously* true of the nation. In both communities, we speak of the common good, in the light of and which and in reference to which any community – from the family to the nation – is understood. The common good is that which the members of said community share. The common good is comprised essentially of a community’s patrimony, a community’s traditions, and it bears a community’s general mindset, a community’s social and political vision. When the common good disappears, so does the community. A community, therefore, has a right, and an obligation, to protect its patrimony and to invite others to join the community *respectful* of this patrimony. The common good *must* be protected and promoted. The common good grows as the community’s members *together* grow in quality and quantity (number).

To these ends laws are established, that is to say, laws for the sake of the common good. And, as is mentioned in the statement, “the rule of law must be respected”, because the common good must be respected. To the degree members of a community transgress the law, they transgress the common good, and thus their neighbor. If certain laws are perceived as not truly serving the common good (immigration laws, for example), they ought to be *changed* (through channels respectful of the common good), not transgressed – even in the name of charity. Indeed, “our Catholic faith urges us to participate in the public debate with charity”, but it is the common good that, practically speaking, *determines* the debate, the common good in which Catholics participate and which Catholics must respect.

### ***Legal versus illegal: an issue for Believers?***

The question then is, “To what extent is a nation, *any* nation, obliged to welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to enter it?” There is indeed tremendous, unfortunate economic disparity in the world. To speak of a “third world” is a grave embarrassment. But such a question is largely that of foreign policy, distinct from that of immigration policy. Does the United States have an obligation to welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to cross her borders, and join her? Do Catholics have an obligation in charity to promote such policy, that is to say, open border policy? Does the common good of the universal human family truncate or negate the common good of the national family? Or does charity well-ordered not begin at home?

Generosity is a must. Fair international economic policy is a must. Open borders, however, are not a must – if there is such a thing as a national community. *If there is* such a thing as a national community, open borders are the negation of the common good, and blurring the lines of legality of status in a country is a lack of healthy and respectful realism regarding the common good. If the common good of the national family is to be protected and promoted by all members of the community, including Catholics, then the distinction between legal immigrant and *il*-legal immigrant is not morally irrelevant. It is, in fact, a fundamental distinction that cannot be ignored, a distinction between persons who respect the common good and persons who do not respect the common good. “The Church is (indeed) the place where illegal immigrants are recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters”, for the Church is the place where *all* are recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. But the illegality of such brothers and sisters – as harsh as this may sound to certain ears – cannot forasmuch – if Catholics are to respect the common good of the national family – be promoted. Open borders advocacy is civilly and socially disrespectful. Immediate, temporary, transitional assistance for a brother or sister in Christ who is here illegally is a mandate from Christ, but it is not on the same level as public policy.

The history of the United States – as the history of every nation – is unfortunately marked by intolerance and discrimination. It is here above all, that Catholics – respectful of the rule of law – are to be ferment of communion and change of hearts. Catholics must, beginning with themselves, be converted unto unconditional love of neighbor. But looking lovingly on neighbor does not necessitate blurring the line of distinction between legal and illegal. In fact, in respecting the distinction, the Church manifests her respect for the common good, and brings clarity and peace to those who, feeling overwhelmed by the large influx of recent immigrants, are tempted to group together unfairly legal immigrants with illegal immigrants, and to make sweeping statements about them, in particular about the largest group of them: “Hispanics”. Immigration policy is a question of respect for the common good. Protection of a nation’s borders is a question of respect for its common good. Such policy and such protection in no way preclude kindness and sensitivity. Enforcement of law is not necessarily a question of harshness (as is so often portrayed in the media).

It also would have been helpful if the statement framed the reason for recent debate more precisely and accurately. The question of immigration has indeed moved to the center of public debate. But why? The question of immigration has moved to the center of public debate because of unbridled, unchecked *illegal* immigration that has left the majority of the American population terribly uncomfortable.

The statement seems to have a subtext, suggested from its very title (“Where *all* find a home”), a subtext that is oddly and disappointingly similar to the majority of mainstream media. There is vague, even weak, reference to the need for law concerning immigration (for without law there is obviously social chaos...), but any policy that is seemingly anything less than unconditional welcome of any and all immigrants in “need” (i.e. *open* borders) is (or at least comes across as being) hastily qualified as “tense” and “confused”

and “intolerant” and “discriminatory” (to use the statement’s adjectives that qualify the current debate).

### ***How authoritative is the Episcopal statement?***

As a statement destined for the flock of Christ, it would have been enlightening if the authority with which the statement is being made had been specified.

- Is it “a perspective” of the Bishops?
- Is it “the opinion” of the Bishops?
- How “magisterial” a statement are we considering?
- What weight ought the statement to bear for the individual Catholic still “in the world” trying to discern what to do regarding immigration, and specifically *illegal* immigration?

Otherwise, without such specification, many receive the statement as authoritative beyond its authority, or are tempted to dismiss it altogether.

### ***What is “Hispanic” ministry?***

As mentioned, I spent seven years in Laredo, Texas. There I lived 15 minutes by bicycle from the bridge that crossed into the heart of Nuevo Laredo, a large Mexican border city of approximately 400,000 people. Laredo was fascinating in many ways, and obliged reflection on questions of community, the common good, cultural assimilation, and how the Church ought to navigate such issues.

I found myself a “minority”, so to speak, in the midst of a people who surprisingly (for the most part) does not consider itself to be Mexican. And yet, I was “Anglo”. “Anglo” is, of course, an appellation essentially predicated on that of “Hispanic” (or “Latino”). Such intriguing appellation manifests the superficial and simplistic (and, dare I say, counter-productive) labeling of persons that has become an American pastime. In the case of “Anglo” and “Hispanic” we see how confusing such labeling has become, for, in order to “accommodate” the latter, the categories of race and language have been combined under the nebulous heading of “ethnicity”, leaving even the Census Bureau at a loss.

The Bishops of Maryland statement regarding immigration is indeed largely with respect to this currently predominant group of recent immigrants to the United States, of those whom we call “Hispanic”. The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are actually terms that do not really exist outside of the United States. They are American mental constructs, that create a generic category of persons, and, might I add, the facile, univocal adoption of the term “Hispanic” by the Church (with little philosophical reflection as to its significance) frankly poses question, and indeed merits further discernment. The very important question of the nature of “Hispanic ministry” beckons sound exploration.

I recently asked the *National Council of La Raza*, “the largest national ‘Latino’ civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States”, to define “Hispanic” for me.

Their initial (quickly received) response was entirely dissatisfying. They in fact hide behind the confusion of the Census Bureau.

**The terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau to identify persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, and Spanish decent; they may be of any race.**

In my response, I made the following statement and asked the following questions, which I believe the *Church*, who has adopted the category “Hispanic”, must answer. By the way, the questions have yet to be answered by *La Raza*. If I allow myself a note of cynicism, I can only guess that real answers to them might undermine an agenda.

**Given the racial and cultural diversity of this vast grouping, it would seem that the only real thing that associates such persons is the Spanish language. If so, a few questions arise:**

- **What becomes of those Americans of such descent who do not speak Spanish?**
- **What of persons of various descents who speak indigenous languages rather than Spanish?**
- **If the associative factor is the Spanish language, does not this appellation give primacy to the Spanish colonization over the indigenous cultures?**
- **Are persons “Hispanic” in these various countries? *or***
- **Is “Hispanic” a mental construct conceived in the United States?**
- **Do not persons from Spain prefer to be called *Spaniard*, since such an appellation recognizes *their* culture?**
- **Why use the categorization given how generic and vague it is, and how it eliminates racial and cultural diversity?**

The Church’s evaluation of the current immigration situation must avoid the generalities common to civil society. One would hope that it is in the Church that the most *nuanced* thinking would be found. For the Church, whose mission entails highlighting and embracing the uniqueness of each individual, of each child of God, to use sweeping categories such as “Hispanic” (or “Latino”) is unfortunate and simplistic. To be truly philosophically sound and consistent, and to be truly respectful of diversity, the Church ought to refer to this portion of her flock as a whole as *Hispanophone*. Otherwise, we ought to speak of Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, and Bolivians, etc., that is to say, of real cultural groups, and this, to the extent that persons have a real (not imagined) association with them.

***Latinos: “objects of suspicion, intolerance, and discrimination”?***

The Hispanophone population is, by many standards, quite privileged. We are, in fact, in many places, experiencing the bilingualization of the United States with little or no input from the American people. What reasonable American would ever expect such privileges abroad? We are experiencing this bilingual phenomenon (to the exclusion, by

the way, of other linguistic groups...) when language is constitutive of the *koinoinia* that maintains social cohesion – in the midst of other forms of diversity. A little trip to Belgium, for example, would erase any doubts about the cultural and national divisiveness of bilingualism.

I recall the year I spent at Saint John parish in Frederick, Maryland. Saint John has a fairly large “Hispanic” population, such that there is a full time associate pastor, Fr. Rafael Murillo, from El Salvador, to minister to them. There is a *separate* Religious Education program for this community within the community (that is to say, a fairly *separate* community) when all of these young people attend the same schools as the larger body of the parish’s young people, are friends with them, and when many of them socialize among themselves in English. My office was next to that of Fr. Rafael. Most of the time, I would hear the children playing in the hallway in English. And I was told that many of them actually wish to be part of the larger children’s or youth program.

When I asked Fr. Rafael why the extra logistical and financial burden to the parish for a program that, as far as I could tell, was largely unnecessary, he told me that it was the parents who want it. Through interaction with some of the members of the “Hispanic” community (who were often invited to broader parochial gatherings but most often declined the offer), I came to realize what I had heard and still hear in various circles: they have little intention of participating in the larger common good. They will do what they can to retain their cultural heritage – even if it means creating a new, supposed “heritage” called “Hispanic”, and even if it means ignoring the existent cultural reality that is “American”.

Two questions arose in my mind:

- Are we serving the common good of the parish, when what has been created, thanks to such cultural gymnastics, is *two* communities, whose true common good, i.e. sonship in Christ – which transcends culture, is being largely ignored?
- Is the parish supposed to be a cultural tool that supersedes the spiritual reality of the one body that we are meant to be?

The fact that “Latinos’ have become the “objects of suspicion, intolerance, and discrimination” is, dare I say, almost understandable. What is to be thought of persons who, in apparently large numbers, often do not seem to respect the common good by not wanting to integrate? What is to be thought when 16% of the Mexican population has moved north of the border? It is the equivalent of 3 million North Koreans moving into South Korea, of 205 million Chinese crossing the border into Russia, of 21 million Russians pouring into Germany, of 42 million Americans landing in Iraq. If well-ordered charity begins at home, then the Church ought to extend compassionate understanding to *American citizens* as they struggle with what amounts, in many ways, to an invasion. The American people are understandably uncomfortable: when they see their neighborhoods quickly changing, large numbers of persons with whom they cannot communicate, large numbers of persons who sometimes do not seem to want to communicate with them, persons who, after many years in the United States, still refer to an-*other* country as their country. The discomfort is, once again, exacerbated when the important distinctions

between civil duties and Christian duties is blurred. When an official statement by members of the hierarchy includes in the definition of neighbor “undocumented immigrants” as though the distinction between legal and illegal is ethically neutral, and without articulating that obligations to the common good remain, light is not shed, but obscured.

### *The Church and the promotion of fair immigration*

Moreover, fair immigration means allowing equal opportunity immigration, which is not the current case in the United States. As was well-stated in a recent article in the Washington Post by Amy Chua (professor at Yale University), “The Right Road to America?” (Sunday, December 16, 2007)

**That the 11 million to 20 million illegal immigrants are 80 percent Mexican and Central American is itself a problem...if the U.S. immigration system is to reflect and further our “ethnically neutral identity” (quotes mine), it must itself be ethnically neutral, offering equal opportunity to Sudanese, Estonians, Burmese and so on. The starkly disproportionate ratio of Latinos -- reflecting geographical fortuity and a large measure of law-breaking -- is inconsistent with this principle.**

### *No easy solution*

Serving basic human needs is indispensable (cf. I John 3:17). And charity urges us to provide for whomever may appear on our doorsteps. But, again, such concrete and generous love does not translate directly into public policy. The argument that is based on circumstance (“Well, you cannot simply deport 12-20 million people”) and not an understanding of the common good is not an argument, but rather resignation or the promotion of an ideology. Resignation and/or ideology are always, in the long run, contrary to love.

What ought to be done is obviously a question with no easy solution. The Catholic finds him or herself with a heavy heart, caught between two options (or a combination thereof): that of legalizing a massive influx of persons – which *seems* to be the higher road of charity, and that of enforcement of existent law – which will lead to some attrition, and which is more respectful of the common good. Whatever option is pursued as a nation, we need to grow in love, which will hopefully purify us of the greed that has so greatly contributed to our getting into this immigration bind, the same greed that has induced so many to turn a blind eye.

It is my hope that intelligent dialogue on this issue will be had in the Church.