

**30th Anniversary of Our Congregational Justice Ministry
April 10, 2010**

**Keynote Address
Immigration – Ron Roche SSJ**

First, I'd like to honor Sr. Dottie Newell who along with Regina Loughery persistently reminded us at the Chapter of 1979 that work for justice was a constitutive element of the gospel. I also want to recognize the work of Nancy, Mary Elizabeth, Kathleen, and Mary Beth whose ministry has brought us to this point of justice jubilee. I think that the topics chosen for today, Immigration and the Earth are among the most important social issues of our time and they are intimately connected. We have seen in Katrina, the tsunami, and the recent earthquake in Haiti that the poor suffer disproportionately from natural disasters. How we respond to these two challenges will define our character as a nation and determine the future of our planet.

As I prepared this presentation, I thought of a Franciscan friar who once began a theology class saying: "In the end we are all beggars telling other beggars where we've found bread." Listening to the stories and experiences of immigrants has nurtured my life, nourished my faith, and challenged me to advocate with them on their behalf. I invite you to listen with an attentive heart to see what in these stories affirms, inspires, or challenges you. Afterwards we'll have some time of silent reflection for you to ponder this and your own experience of immigrants. Then you will be invited to share from your heart with those around you. How is God moving and calling you, us at this critical time in our congregational and national history?

Last January eight of us from the Diocese of Metuchen went to Santa Rosa, our sister diocese in Guatemala. There we saw up front and personal why people decide to immigrate to the United States. There the five clinics sponsored by St. Peter's University Hospital in New Brunswick are weighing and measuring children because chronic malnutrition has become acute as a result of a drought which has caused crop failure. Farmers who borrowed money for seeds have no harvest. Many families are eating one meal a day. Parents are struggling and not succeeding in providing food, clothing, and housing for their children. That is what drives many immigrants to decide to leave everything they know and love to come to the United States. At a Sunday liturgy in the

town of Chiapas, we saw mostly grandparents and grandchildren. Almost the whole middle generation was missing, gone to the North to find work to support their families at home.

In New Jersey and elsewhere we see immigrant families living in one room and sharing bathroom and kitchen facilities with other families in the same apartment. Last year a mother whose children were given a year of Catholic education, uniforms, books, and book bags, took her children out of the school because she could not afford to pack them a lunch. In the public school, the children would be given breakfast as well as lunch. The father of that family worked full time, 6 days a week and still was not able to meet the rent unless other family members shared the apartment. When the mother went to work, she paid for child care for her youngest child and transportation to get her to work. She worked diligently in a factory for two weeks and when she tried to cash her paycheck, she was told there were insufficient funds.

Undocumented immigrants keep us aware of what is most important in life – profound faith in God, deep love for their extended families, and a generosity in sharing from their sustenance and not their surplus with their families back home and their neighbors in need. They teach us that blessings received are meant to be shared, that God never blesses at the expense of others but always that we in turn may be blessings to others. The greatest source of income in Guatemala is the remittances, the money sent by relatives in the United States. In most cases it is part of every paycheck.

We who are citizens of the United States have been so abundantly blessed. Are we in turn blessings for our immigrant sisters and brothers? Do we feel connected to them by human bonds? Are we genuinely at one with members of our faith communities who come to this country without documents in search of the basics of life for their families?

Many of us here have participated in the JFI Campaign urging our members of Congress to support immigration reform based on these three principles:

- keeping immigrant families together
- adopting smart and humane enforcement
- and ensuring that immigrants without legal status begin a path towards citizenship

First, we want legislation that keeps families together.

Henry, a naturalized American citizen, is my co-worker at Catholic Charities. In 2005, he married Irene who had overstayed her Visa. He began immigration paperwork so that Irene could get proper documentation to stay in the United States. Irene was encouraged to return to Trinidad and appeal her case from there. Her case was rejected. Subsequent appeals and waivers were denied. Henry was encouraged to make a Humanitarian Appeal through Eric Holder at the Department of Justice. This office claimed that they could not reverse a decision made by the United States Customs and Immigration Service. Irene has been barred from reentering the United States for 10 years. She can apply again in 2016. Meanwhile, Henry returns to Trinidad to visit her four times a year. Their only hope is for a family reunification piece in a Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

Last year at a meeting in Morristown, NJ, a hotbed for immigration enforcement, the then state attorney, Chris Christie, told the people who gathered that coming into this country without authorization or overstaying a Visa is not a crime, not a violation of the US Criminal code. It is a civil offense for which the government can impose civil penalties, namely deportation. Irene has committed no crime but cannot join her husband. She is being punished for overstaying her Visa and violating civil immigration laws.

With immigration reform on hold, ICE officials have come down hard on undocumented workers. In 2007, a workplace raid in Laurel Miss. rounded up 595 workers. Nearly 300 children under 5 years of age and 187 school-age children were left behind.

One of the most painful experiences of undocumented immigrants is that they cannot return to visit children and parents left behind. When parents are ill or dying, the decision to stay or leave is heart-wrenching. Mario came to the parish to ask if his two little children could be baptized if their mother was not here. She went back to Mexico to care for her dying mother last summer and has not been able to get back across the border.

Secondly, we want legislation that adopts smart and humane enforcement.

The concentrated border-enforcement policies have not stopped or even slowed down the pace of unauthorized immigration. Instead it has contributed to a surge in migrant fatalities by channeling migrants through extremely hazardous mountain and desert areas, rather than the relatively safe urban corridors used in the past. A report released in October 2009 estimates that 5,607 migrants died while crossing the desert between 1994 and 2008. (Amer. Civil Liberties Union of San Diego and Mexico's Natl. Commission of Human Rights)

Our enforcement only policy blurs the line between immigrants and terrorist. In recent years, riots in Paris and the home-grown terrorists in Britain have shown us the consequences of not integrating our immigrant communities. The 9/11 Commission reported that reaching out to immigrant communities supports National Security. They wrote that "our borders and immigration system, including law enforcement, ought to send a message of welcome, tolerance, and justice to the immigrant communities in the US and in their countries of origin. We should reach out to immigrant communities. Good immigration services are a way of doing so that is valuable in every way – including intelligence".

Rosa, a parishioner at Sacred Heart in New Brunswick, told me about her three sons. Born in the US, they were taken to Mexico as toddlers to be cared for by their grandmother while their parents continued to work here. In 2002 when they were 7, 8, and 9 years old, an uncle brought them back. When they arrived at Newark Airport with birth certificates, social security cards, and a letter written by their mother giving permission to the uncle to transport them, they were detained. Their uncle, an American citizen, was arrested for human trafficking. The boys were taken to a detention center in Pennsylvania, and their father who is undocumented and who had come to the airport to meet them was detained and later deported to Mexico.

I met with the boys a few weeks ago. They told that when they were detained, they were so afraid because they didn't speak English and had no idea where they were. Their clothes were replaced with uniforms. Although there were two bunk beds in every room, the brothers were separated and placed to sleep with roommates who didn't speak Spanish. They think they were there about three or four days but it seemed to them to be an eternity. When their mother finally

found out where they were, she was frantic to get them, but terrified that she would meet the same fate as her husband. She waited outside in the car while her sister who had documentation went in to get the boys. Immigration officers insisted that they would release them only to a parent. Imagine Rosa's emotions as she entered the Detention Center. Thankfully, the story had a happy ending. Rosa was able to walk out of the Center with her three boys in tow.

Thirdly we want legislation that provides a pathway to citizenship for the more than 12 million undocumented immigrants who live and work in the United States.

The undocumented immigrants that you and I know are not criminals or terrorists. Immigrants work hard busing our dishes, picking our vegetables, cutting our lawns, cleaning our homes and offices, and caring for our children and our elderly parents. They gather at our Welcome Center and our ESL classes. They are our students, our clients, our parishioners, and our friends. We have to find a way to bring them out of the shadows, to protect them from exploitation, and to regularize their status for their sake and for ours.

Many say: "Our ancestors came here legally." The truth is that before 1924, there were not a lot of laws restricting immigration. If you arrived at the port, put your foot on the shore, and didn't have a contagious disease, you were in like Flynn. Suppose that our present restrictions were in place during the time of the Potato Famine. Can you imagine an Irish farmer looking at the face of his child whose teeth were green from eating grass and saying – "Sorry, lad, there are no Visas. We'll have to wait our turn." Isn't it more likely to imagine that he'd come to the United States, feed his family and then settle the paperwork. That's what immigrants are trying to do today.

Anti-immigrant sentiments are so strong that some benefactors of Catholic Charities have begun to restrict their donations saying that their money cannot be used for any program that benefits "illegal aliens". This creates quite a dilemma for our Executive Director. Do you accept the money and apply it to other programs or do you try to engage the giver knowing that you may lose the gift. I wonder if fear of losing needed financial assistance is what keeps Catholic Social teaching out of the pulpit.

Immigration Reform is not just a political or economic reality. At its heart it is a moral issue. Human rights and human dignity do not depend on where you were born, when you came, or what papers you have. They are God-given. We who boast of our American values must grant them to those who live among us yet in the shadows of our society. Would truly American values sanction the deportation of parents of citizen children? Would they support a permanent underclass of people exploited for cheap labor and denied workers' rights?

What gives us hope in this uphill battle? –

The immigrants themselves. Their keeping on, keeping on. Their courage and faith despite their daily experience of rejection and injustice. Parents and teachers who form youth in the ways of respect, hospitality and Gospel justice. Volunteers who teach ESL and Marion Aherne who teaches Spanish. Kay Coll and those who joined her in the walk from Liberty Park to the Elizabeth Detention Center. All those who encouraged pastors to participate in the JFI Postcard Campaign and the people who signed the cards The network of immigrant advocates who gathered more than 200,000 people calling for comprehensive immigration reform on the national mall. All of you sisters, associates, partners in mission and friends who chose to be here today.

And most importantly, the example and teachings of Jesus who was once himself a refugee in Egypt. He became an itinerant preacher who saw religious and cultural boundaries as places of encounter. He consistently crossed borders to engage the other, particularly those rejected and marginalized by the society in which he lived. He cautions us that what we do to the least of those among us we do to Him. Can we claim to be his followers if we fail to recognize his presence in the undocumented immigrants among us?

In 2004, we owned that to be a SSJ is to be about relationships. Let's enhance our relationships with our immigrant sisters and brothers. No one has a surplus of time but can we like they give from our sustenance? Can we worship periodically with an immigrant community, volunteer in an ESL program, or help out in places where immigrants gather at the Welcome Center or in parish or community centers? Will we work with other groups to advocate for immigration

reform? Can we pledge that within a month, each one of us will be able to put a name and face with this issue.

At an earlier Chapter we made a preferential option for the poor. Undocumented immigrants are among the poorest of the poor. They live daily in fear of raids and deportation. Denied due process, they are detained in deplorable conditions in detention centers and county prisons. Brought here as children, they graduate high school unable to drive, work, or continue their studies. Let's make choices with them in mind. Let's hold them in our hearts in all the situations in which we find ourselves. Let's work to raise consciousness about immigrants in ourselves and in those we serve. (SSJ Directory)

And can we do the harder and very important work of building relationships with those who think differently than we do? Can we meet those who are against putting undocumented immigrants on the path to citizenship to listen, to understand and to speak the unspoken word that brings down walls and builds bridges? Support for immigrants in our families, parishes, communities, and neighborhoods will win support for immigration reform on Capitol Hill.

This is a critical time for our congregation. We have responded to the Vatican Inquiry by allowing our Constitutions to define who we are and what we do. Each day we make a new beginning that that may be a reality in our lives. This year Marie O'Brien and Karen Owens have professed vows to God and faith in us. In August, Julie will do the same. We have seen the power of the prophetic voice of women religious whose inclusive love embraced the poor as well as the unborn, whose courage to speak out helped free some legislators to pass health care reform. Our recent Chapter has challenged us to bring the gifts of our Charism to the signs of our time. Is immigration reform calling us to courageous action? Do we as a congregation called to reconciliation and inclusive love have an important role to play in what some have called the civil rights movement of our time? To what action, next step is God inviting and calling you and us at this critical time in our congregational and national history?

Questions:

What in these stories inspired, affirmed, or challenged you?

There is a clear Gospel call to welcome the stranger among us. Why do so many people find this so challenging?

To what action, next step is God calling you/us at this critical time in our congregational and national history?