A Lesson in Compassion
Catholic Teach-In on the Child Migrant Crisis and Its Causes

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

Children and families fleeing violence and impunity in Central America this past summer evoked a wide range of responses from the American public. At one end of the spectrum, images of poor migrants clinging to trains headed to the U.S. and hundreds of Latino children sleeping on the floors of Border Patrol processing centers struck fear and anger in the hearts of Americans with nativist tendencies, reactions stoked by fear-mongering talk show hosts and politicians. Participants listen to unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, deepens one’s existing worldviews.

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly experienced this transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of The Catholic Teach-in on the Child Migrant Crisis and its protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who defeated the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, deepens one’s existing worldviews.

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly experienced this transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of The Catholic Teach-in on the Child Migrant Crisis and its protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who defeated the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, deepens one’s existing worldviews.

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly experienced this transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of The Catholic Teach-in on the Child Migrant Crisis and its protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who defeated the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, deepens one’s existing worldviews.

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly experienced this transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of The Catholic Teach-in on the Child Migrant Crisis and its protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who defeated the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, deepens one’s existing worldviews.

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly experienced this transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of The Catholic Teach-in on the Child Migrant Crisis and its protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who defeated the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.

In Catholic thought, “authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image” within the human person.” Created in God’s image, every person “has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being.” We have a duty to respect each one’s right to exercise freedom as essential to human dignity.

“Freedom From” or “Freedom For”?
Notice the language “free and responsible being.” Unlike some philosophers, Catholic thought does not consider freedom purely from an individualistic perspective “reducing it to the arbitrary and uncontrolled exercise of one’s personal autonomy.” It is not just “freedom from.” Our theology views the human person as essentially social—both sacred and social. Christian anthropology sees freedom, then, as one of four social values “inherent in the dignity of the human person, whose authentic development they foster.” These four social values are truth, freedom, justice, and love, and they are very interdependent. Our freedom, then, is “freedom for”—for the purpose of seeking what is true and loving, ultimately seeking God.

Freedom and Social Justice
This freedom is protected by social justice and the common good, which demand respect for the dignity and freedom of others and that society be organized to promote individual freedoms, optimal social well-being, and proper group and individual relationships. As ethicist David Hollenbush, S.J., explains: This self-limiting concept of the common good and the role of government in protecting it shows that, for Pius XII as well as for the entire tradition, human rights cannot be understood apart from social interdependence, nor can social well being be understood apart from personal rights.

Freedom, then, is circumscribed by the social nature of the person and the common good, as well as our Christian understanding of love as mutuality and the Gospel’s preferential love for the least among us. For example, the “free” agreement between employer and employee to “the amount of pay to be received is not sufficient for the agreed-upon salary to qualify as a just wage,” because a just wage “must not be below the level of subsistence” of the worker: natural justice precedes and is above the freedom of the contract. “Freedom From” or “Freedom For”?

Wages are only one example of how certain economic, social, political, and cultural conditions “are needed for a just exercise of freedom.” These may include private property and other private ownership of goods that “assure a person a highly necessary sphere for the exercise of his personal and family autonomy and ought to be considered as an extension of human freedom...” It also means that, facing growing income and wealth inequality, “The fundamental task of the State in economic matters is that of determining an appropriate juridical framework for regulating economic affairs, in order to safeguard the prerequisites of a free economy, which presumes a certain equality between the parties, such that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience.”

Ultimately, contemporary Catholic thought positions freedom in the context of the doctrine of solidarity—recognizing the human, practical, and spiritual ties uniting people and social groups and calling for “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” because “we are all really responsible for all.”

ENDNOTES
1 Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World), 1965, no. 17.
3 Gaudium et Spes, no. 117.
4 Compendium, op. cit, emphasis in original.
5 Ibid., no. 197.
7 Compendium, op. cit., no. 102.
8 Ibid., no. 250, emphasis added.
9 Gaudium et Spes, no. 116.
10 Compendium, op. cit., no. 116.
11 Ibid., no. 152, quoting St. Pope John Paul II in Centesimus Annus (1984), employee in original.
12 Ibid., no. 193, quoting St. Pope John Paul II in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1988), emphasis in original.
March 31, 2014, the Pew Trusts expects that Mississippi will avoid all of its projected prison growth over the next 10 years and save $5 billion dollars under the new law. H.B. 585 was supported by the Catholic Dioceses of Mississippi, and signed by Governor Phil Bryant on the February 19, 2014, Catholic Day at the Capitol in Jackson. The law is consistent with Catholic social teaching about restorative justice. 

The challenges that Louisiana faces are similar to Mississippi’s, only a little more daunting. Louisiana leads the nation in the rate that it incarcerates its citizens—868 out of every 100,000—and the majority of its inmates are nonviolent offenders. Louisiana could significantly relieve its fiscal stress through sentencing reform, Louisiana’s prison population increased from 11,007 in 1992 to 39,709 in 2011. Whereas the state paid out $442.3 million (2011 dollars) in corrections expenditures in 1992, it spent $757.4 million in 2011, an increase of $315 million (71 percent). Louisiana’s liberal and conservative policy thinktanks are touting the fiscal case for criminal justice reform in Louisiana, including the Reason Foundation, the Pelican Institute, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Although Louisiana legislators have passed modest reforms in recent years, other states, including Mississippi and Texas, have gone further.

These conservative and libertarian thinktanks argue that Louisiana spends scarce prison resources on recidivists who pose little or no threat to society and are routinely sentenced to exceedingly long terms in prison with no opportunity for parole or suspension of sentence, in most cases because of the state’s determinate sentencing laws. Although the reform does not address all drivers of hyper-incarceration, especially racial disparities in policing, arrests, and sentencing, Mississippi and Texas demonstrate how bipartisan leadership can bolster public safety and reduce the costs of over-incarceration.

Caused by the news reports was the question: “Who is responsible for the number of children that are suffering?” Fr. Boyle writes, “Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what suffering people have experienced.”

ENDNOTES

10 From written responses to questionnaire

12 Phone interview with author, August 21, 2014.

13 Phone interview with author, August 4, 2005.

14 Mollie Reilly, “Another Congressman Suggests...,” The Huffington Post, August 4, 2014, on line with author.


17 Phone interview with author, August 21, 2014.