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 clunging 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. Protests in Murrieta, California, and McAllen, Texas, denounced child refugees as invaders and criminals. Although all children apprehended at the border are screened and vaccinated at state-licensed shelters, the media had little problem likening current immigration management programs, i.e. "catch and release," as though frightened and desperate children were undesired fish or annoying wild animals.4

Thankfully people of faith countered hand-wringing 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. Where there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, giving and receiving—is then both changed and the moment has begun to move toward transformation. Rohr warns that without the other, humans are "alone and dead." In his words, "The encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, "otherness," such as the alien, the sinner, has deepened one's existing worldviews. Otherness, "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."4 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: Freedom and social justice cannot be "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.

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In Catholic thought, "authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image" within the human person.1 Created in God's image, every person has "the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being."2 We have a duty to respect each one's right to exercise freedom as essential to human dignity.3

"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."4 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."4 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.

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Wages are only one example of how certain economic, social, political, and cultural conditions "are needed for a just exercise of freedom."5 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..."6 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 as powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience."7

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"8 because "we are all really responsible for all."9

ENDNOTES

1 Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World), 1965, no. 11.
3 Gaudium et Spes, no. 1156.
4 Compendium, op. cit, emphasis in original.
5 Ibid., no. 197.
7 Compendium, op. cit., no. 302.
8 Ibid., no. 260, emphasis added.
9 Ibid., op. cit., no. 354.
10 Compendium, op. cit., no. 516.
11 Ibid., no. 152, quoting St. Pope John Paul II in Generosity Annus (1991), emphasis in original.