“On ‘Strangers No Longer’”

Perspectives on the Historic U.S.-Mexican Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Migration

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**Synopsis**

As Congress again considers immigration reform, it helps to explore this recent anthology that unpacks the historic 2003 pastoral letter of the U.S. and Mexican bishops. “On ‘Strangers No Longer’” is at once a policy primer, a data source, a history book, a theology guide, a pastoral sourcebook, and more.

While the book’s approach is comprehensive, the questions in this discussion guide are not intended to be exhaustive. More and deeper questions could be asked, based both on the words of the book and the meaning between its lines. This guide simply provides structure for personal reflection as well as for parish study groups, school classes and others exploring “On ‘Strangers No Longer.’”

**Chapter 1: Immigration As a Sign of the Times**

Todd Scribner offers a thorough interpretive history of migration in the United States, exploring the role that the church has played in supporting migrants and opposing unjust restrictions.

1) Waves of immigrants to America transformed Catholicism from a small minority religion to the largest U.S. denomination, growing from 40,000 in 1790 to 16 million in 1910. What opposition did the “immigrant church” encounter? What was the nature of discrimination and other challenges individuals faced? What advocacy and practical steps did the church engage in to respond? (pp. 3-6)

2) How did the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) help welcome newcomers to America? What was the church’s self-interest in implementing follow-up programs in the immigrants’ destination dioceses? (pp. 7-9)

3) Beginning in the 1880s, federal restrictions tightened the number of immigrants. Some people felt that immigrants were hurting the economy and weakening social structures. What similar sentiments exist in today’s society? (p. 10)

4) The restrictive measure of a literacy test was the focus of ongoing debate in the late 1800s and early 1900s. How are the pragmatic thoughts of Fr. John Ryan and the pastoral thoughts of Cardinal James Gibbons echoed in modern debate over immigration? (p. 10-11)
5) What was the bracero program? Why was it started? What problems emerged? What role did Msgr. George Higgins play in leading to its termination? (pp. 14-15)

6) What concerns did the NCWC have with the national origins quota system? (pp. 13-18)

7) What were the two approaches the church took to provide relief to refugees after World War II? What were the results? How does this reflect the “two feet” approach of direct service and social change? (p. 16)

8) What policy challenges emerged after the 1965 Immigration Act? How did the church respond to these? (pp. 20-23)

9) What compromises did the USCCB make in its advocacy on the Immigration Reform and Control Act? What were some of IRCA’s weaknesses? (pp. 23-25)

10) Were the enhanced border security efforts of the 1990s effective? What societal tensions emerged from the enforcement-only policies, and how did the U.S. bishops respond? (pp. 25-27)

Chapter 2: Pastoral Perspectives on Migration
Fr. Allan Deck explores the pastoral needs of immigrants with an enlightened perspective that sees them not as needy victims of injustice but as capable agents of social change.

1) What factors led to the decline of the national parish? What has caused the emergence of multicultural parishes? (pp. 42-43)

2) “An age of growing diversity in the Church will also be an age of diversity in pastoral methods, expressions and approaches.” How have pluralism in the church and thoughtful adaptation led to positive response to new needs? (p. 46)

3) How can the pursuit of the American Dream by Hispanic/Latino Catholics undermine the potential they have for increasing the church’s influence on American life? (p. 48)

4) Hispanic/Latino Catholicism is described as “one that demonstrates faith in practice,” focused more on celebration than on intellectualism, expressivity of faith more than organization. Do you find this refreshing or impractical? How does it compare to what you seek from church? (p. 53)

5) “Hispanic ministry truly is youth and young adult ministry.” Does the church properly invest its financial, pastoral, catechetical and liturgical resources in its younger members? How do we make youth a stronger priority? (p. 54)

6) The bishops call those ministering to immigrants to frame the topic of intercultural relations in the language of the church as opposed to secular thought and terms regarding multiculturalism. What do scripture, tradition, and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council offer to ministry among immigrants? (p. 55)

7) Why is it important to shift the dynamic from immigrants being objects or receivers of goodwill to their empowerment to respond to their own needs? (p. 56)

8) What spiritual process must the church engage in before it is truly evangelizing to immigrants? Did the church fail in opportunities with previous generations of immigrants, allowing them to be merely well-adjusted Americans rather than missionary disciples? (pp. 58-59)

Chapter 3: A Ministry of Reconciliation
Fr. Daniel Groody begins Chapter 3 by stating that migration is literally in our genes as humans. It is also part of our spiritual DNA, weaving all the way back to Abraham and extending on to the sending of the disciples out to all the nations.

1) Pope John Paul II said the diversity found within the walls of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.,
DISCUSSION GUIDE

reflects the unique but common cultural back-grounds that converge in American Catholicism. How have you experienced unity in the diversity of the church? How does diversity make the church more prophetic in addressing the challenges that migration presents? (pp. 64-65)

2) How does the story of the migrant who felt as if they were treated like a dog challenge us to respect humans as being created in the image and likeness of God? If you are comfortable, share an experience of having been dehumanized, or a time you’ve treated others in unworthy ways. (p. 67)

3) What are some ways in which people are treated as if they are problems? In what ways is immigration a symptom of deep social imbalances that cause people to leave their homelands? (pp. 68-69)

4) Migrants living on meager wages spent 2.5 times as much money helping alleviate global poverty as the wealthiest nations in the world. How does this challenge dehumanizing stereotypes, perhaps some you’ve held, about migrants? (p. 70)

5) God’s migration into human existence is a journey into otherness and vulnerability. Why can Jesus identify with those who are abandoned and alienated? (p. 71)

6) What are some of the borders Jesus crosses? What human law does God break to reveal greater laws of mercy, love and grace? (p. 72)

7) Jesus called the scribe, tax collector, fisherman and zealot to the same table, challenging his followers to a new kind of relationship beyond humanly constructed borders. Whom might Jesus call to the table today? How have the words and actions of Pope Francis challenged human notions of worthiness and unworthiness? (p. 75)

8) In its care for all, especially those most in need, the church not only goes beyond borders but unites itself with those on the other side of them. When have you, either personally or in the name of your faith, crossed a border? Talk about this experience. (p. 76)

9) Paul describes Christians as living in this world but carrying the passport of another world. The author of Hebrews describes ancestors in faith as desiring “a better homeland, a heavenly one.” What territories are stamped on your spiritual passport? What is your destination? (p. 77)

10) Ignoring those in pain and building walls of separation alienates people not only from each other but also from ourselves, from who we are truly meant to be. How can the walls we create – in society or within ourselves – disconnect us from God, from others, from ourselves? (p. 80)

Chapter 4: Legalization and the Undocumented
Kristin Heyer uses moral principles of Catholic Social Teaching to promote a legalization process.

1) The plight of immigrants is said to signal the moral failure of the international community to prevent the circumstances propelling dangerous, unbidden journeys. How might we help the church re-shift the focus from border enforcement to addressing immigration push factors? (p. 87)

2) How has the church’s promotion of solidarity and communal support run counter to the American value of self-sufficiency? What have you seen or heard in your own parish or community that disturbs or encourages you? (p. 89)

3) Define “neighbor love” in your own words. How do parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Last Judgment lift up care for vulnerable strangers as a condition of such love? Are these parables relevant in today’s world? (p. 90)

4) Accepting the labor, taxes and purchasing power of immigrants without offering legal protections or viable paths to citizenship creates a permanent underclass. How does such exploitation harm human dignity and the common good? (pp. 90, 92)

5) Pope John Paul II wrote that “capital should be at the service of labor and not labor at
the service of capital.” What examples of this can be found in today’s economy? What can go wrong when our priorities flip? (p. 93)
6) Why is an understanding of the universal destination of created goods important to the Catholic perspective on migration? Define this concept in your own words. Does it lie in tension with the right of nations to control their borders? (p. 94)
7) Society often sees immigrants as burdens, not as bearers of dignity and potential contributors. How can immigrants, if given rights and the opportunity for the meaningful participation that these rights require, improve the nation? (p. 96)
8) The United States allocates the same number of visas to Mexico as to Botswana and Nepal. What’s wrong with this picture? (p. 98)
9) How does pitting people against one another (native vs. immigrant, parents vs. children in the DREAM Act context) do violence to the common good? How can compromise and a broader view help lead to progress? (p. 99)
10) What can be said about the United States when it awards personhood to corporations and excludes its tax-paying workers from labor protections? (pp. 99-100)

Chapter 5: Migrant Abuses and Migrant Worker Programs
Patricia Zamudio explores factors that inspire people to migrate. She examines guest worker programs as well as the difficulties and dangers that unauthorized Central American migrants encounter when passing through Mexico.
1) Why is it hard for people to accept that most irregular migrants are trying to secure a dignified future for their families? (pp. 107-109)
2) In “Strangers No Longer,” the bishops say that people should be able to exercise their human rights no matter what their condition, no matter where they live. Describe the conundrum people face when deciding to stay home or migrate. (pp. 109-110)
3) Describe ways in which guest-worker programs dehumanize migrants and leave them vulnerable to the whims of employers and market forces. (pp. 115-116)
4) How do recruiters and employers exploit guest workers? (pp. 119-121)
5) How does a greater awareness of human dignity, as lifted up in scripture, empower migrants and their host communities? (pp. 119, 123)
6) Did the dangers, and corruption that irregular migrants face in their passage through Mexico surprise you? How does it compare to the obstacles they face if they make it to the United States? (pp. 124-128)
7) What roles do pastoral workers play in shelters along the migration route? (pp. 126, 129)
8) Kidnappings and police complicity leave irregular migrants with no one to trust. Have you ever felt imprisoned by fear or danger? To whom did you turn? (p. 130)
9) Migrants are often seen as intruders. What welcome disruptions might foreigners bring to the lives of those who welcome them? (p. 132)
10) A societal mindset that values economic profit over human well-being places migrants on a journey of despair. How does the church work to make it a journey of hope? (pp. 132-133)

Chapter 6: Migration-related development
Don Kerwin explores the push and pull factors that drive migration, including globalization.
1) Considering the dark migration journey described in Chapter 5, do remittance flows and other benefits justify the risks? (pp. 140-141)
2) Migration policies can be a win-win for developed nations with aging and shrinking labor forces and for developing nations. Should this reality suggest a greater openness among U.S. Baby Boomers to immigration reform? (p. 143)
3) Compare the attitudes of Americans worried about societal changes caused by immigration and loss of their way of life with the church’s call to welcome newcomers based on “faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant.” Where and how can conversion begin? (p. 144-145)

4) Is it naïve for Catholics to believe that migration can lead to unity, based on the sharing of values of culturally diverse people? What can you do to help build bridges, not walls? (p. 145)

5) Sustainable development does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. How does immigration reform support a view that looks beyond the here and now? (p. 146)

6) Pope John Paul II defined solidarity not as “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people,” but as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good… because we are all really responsible for all.” When have you seen people or the church show this deeper commitment? (p. 148)

7) Sovereign states have a right to control their borders. People have a right to migrate to realize their God-given rights. If the common good compels the balance of these rights to tip in favor of migration, how do the contributions of migrants ease tensions? (p. 150)

8) The “right not to have to migrate,” while an ideal worth protecting, has not been an effective theme in the U.S. immigration debate. Discuss a few ways in which the migration and development dialogue can support this aspiration. (pp. 151-157)

9) Universal birth registration could provide rights and protections to millions of migrants. How could the Catholic Church encourage these and other reforms that would increase the impact of migration-related development? (pp. 152-153)

Chapter 7: Migration in Mexico

Leticia Calderon Chelius looks at the migration situation in Mexico. These questions draw parallels to the U.S. perspective and response to immigration.

1) Does it surprise you that Mexico, a nation from which so many migrants come to the United States and through which so many more come, historically lacked awareness of immigration or took a hostile position toward migrants? (pp. 166-168)

2) Does it trouble you to see that poverty and the pursuit of opportunities might be seen as criminal in Mexico? Is this true of the United States, at least in our common perceptions? (p. 169)

3) Mexico’s migration law includes protection of migrants’ human rights, efforts to combat corruption, and clearer categories of migration status. What do you see as the most vital needs of U.S. immigration reform? (pp. 171-172)

4) Among criticisms of Mexico’s migration law are its lack of protections for people passing through Mexico and for children. Why are these groups especially vulnerable? (pp. 173-174)

5) After reading the example of corruption (p. 176, top), imagine yourself on such a truck. Does this vulnerability frighten you? Which classes of people are disposable?

6) Discuss how activists, especially Catholics, have become voices of hope amid the migration holocaust in Mexico? What role have activists played in U.S. immigration tensions? (pp. 175-180)

7) Activists who defend migrants join them in their walk of vulnerability. To paraphrase Pope Francis, they take on the smell of the flock. What level of risk are you willing to take on? (p. 180)

8) Read the first sentence on p. 182 regarding lessons learned from the Mexican immigration debate. What has U.S. society learned about itself through its years of policy debate?

9) Impunity, corruption, and the permissibility of violence are threats to people passing through Mexico. Do the risks they take affect your thoughts on their presence on U.S. soil? (p. 182)
Chapter 8: The scourge of human trafficking
In “Strangers No Longer;” (SNL) the bishops called human trafficking a “scourge.” Terry Coonan explores the reality of modern slavery and the church’s advocacy and strong pastoral ministry to its victims.

1) As many as 27 million people may now live in conditions approximating slavery, arguably more slaves than at any time in history. Does this surprise or alarm you? (pp. 193-194)

2) The Palermo Protocol and the Trafficking Victim Protection Act address trafficking primarily from the perspective of law enforcement. What voids to this approach does the church address? (pp. 196-197)

3) What root causes of trafficking push people into this modern-day slavery? (p. 199)

4) The church takes a visionary approach by addressing trafficking’s “pull factors.” What are these, and can the “pull” perspective be applied to broader migration issues? (pp. 199-200)

5) A society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members. Which essential services does the church provide trafficking victims? (pp. 200-201)

6) The church in the United States had an extraordinary opportunity to provide social services to trafficking victims from 2006 to 2011. How do you feel about this work and how it ended? (pp. 203-204)

“Part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism; accepting migrants not as foreboding aliens, terrorists or economic threats, but rather as persons with dignity and rights, revealing the presence of Christ.”

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7) Either carve the above quote in stone or take as much time as you can afford to discern and discuss what it means to you. (p. 206)

8) Commercial sexual exploitation is a major part of human trafficking. Do you believe that all prostitution is sex trafficking? Is the right to engage in it “an impoverished and dubious (right) at best?” How does Catholic teaching balance the contentious debate? (pp. 206-209)

Chapter 9: Better polices for refugees
Maryann Cusimano Love unpacks lessons gleaned from refugee policy history, from WWII to 9/11.

1. Reflect on ways in which the Holy Family qualified as refugees according to international law. Does this change or deepen your feelings about refugees? (p. 214)

2. How does the holistic approach called for in SNL, marked by accompaniment and solidarity, differ from public policy responses? (p. 214)

3. The 1951 U.N. Convention on Refugees was part a sweeping response to the tragedies of the Holocaust. How has it made a difference? How is its definition of refugees inadequate? (p. 216)

4. What problems do poverty and globalization add to the challenges refugees encounter? (p. 217)

5. Cardinal McCarrick’s scenario of a Christian family in Iraq illustrates the extreme choices refugees face. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you decide? (pp. 219-220)

6. The church advocated strongly for the International Religious Freedom Act. What benefits and protections does it provide refugees? (pp. 220-221)

7. None of the 9/11 terrorists entered the United States as a refugee, but much harm was done to refugee admission numbers and public policy. What obstacles does the Patriot Act create for refugees said to have provided material support to terrorist groups? (pp. 222-224)
8. Climate change migration is increasing at alarming rates. How can Catholics support these migrants? How might you redefine policy so that they are recognized as refugees? (pp. 224-225)

9. Women make up a vast majority of the poor, victims of religious persecution, and refugees as a whole. Why is this? How are women making a difference in responding to refugee needs and improving policy? (pp. 226-227)

Chapter 10: Support for Immigrant Youth
Colleen Cross provides background on the DREAM Act, emphasizing the church’s commitment to immigrant youth through human dignity, solidarity, and integral human development.

1) Mamadou “did not ask to come” to the United States, but realizes the blessing of her American education. Have you ever taken education for granted? Do you empathize with her plight? (p. 231)

2) What barriers keep unauthorized migrant youth from pursuing higher education? What are the goals and eligibility requirements of the DREAM Act? (pp. 233-234)

3) While “Strangers No Longer” does not refer to the DREAM Act, what does it say regarding human dignity that applies to this legislation? (p. 239)

4) The *Plyler v. Doe* decision allows undocumented youth to attend U.S. primary and secondary schools. Do you agree that the DREAM Act would be a good expansion on this investment in the development of these young people? (pp. 240, 243)

5) What practical economic realities support passage of the DREAM Act? Do you support a “half a loaf” approach that separates the act from a comprehensive immigration reform bill? (pp. 240-241)

6) Solidarity is a journey of accompaniment, attained through recognition of God in “those society deems ‘other,’ less than, or forgotten.” Have you seen God in the faces of migrant people? (p. 242)

7) Pope Paul VI wrote that authentic development must be integral, that is “it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man.” How does education promote development? Who can be left out in an integral approach? (p. 243)

Chapter 11: Illegal Immigration, the Bishops, and the Laity: “Strangers No Longer”
Mark Ensalaco explores how the bishops who issued SNL had limited influence on public policy while still effectively calling U.S. Catholics to solidarity.

1) The bishops badly misread the political climate. They saw migration as necessary and beneficial, calling for hospitality and reform. They were met with hostility. How has the situation worsened or improved since 2003? (pp. 251-252)

2) Does the bishops’ call for the legalization of 11 million migrants trespass unreasonably on the right of nations to secure their borders? (p. 254)

3) The church says it is obligated to help shape the moral character of society. How has this created tensions with the role of the laity? (pp. 255-258)

4) Did the bishops exceed their competence in SNL, or does its call to reason and conscience withstand scrutiny? (p. 259)

5) SNL frames the immigration debate around the Universal Destination of Goods. When people must migrate to support and protect themselves, nations who are able to receive them should do so. Is this logical or too simplistic? (p. 260)

6) SNL says nations should not control their borders merely to acquire more wealth. Is that the United States’ intention? Are there legitimate concerns about costs of social programs for migrants, cultural tensions, or an imbalance in the electorate? (pp. 263-265)
7) The gospel does not change, but international human rights law is constantly evolving. Despite resistance from powerful interests, is the church always compelled to apply the gospel to complex situations? (pp. 266-267)
8) Should *SNL* have placed more of the onus for reform on Mexico? Which tensions should have been raised? (pp. 267-271)
9) What is the danger of focusing too much thought and effort on resettlement efforts and not enough on justice in the migrants’ homelands? (pp. 271-272)
10) Have U.S. Catholics heeded the call to solidarity with and responsibility to migrants in their midst? What responsibility does the laity have to its bishops? (pp. 274-275)

Chapter 12: Steps toward Immigration Reform

J. Kevin Appleby highlights lessons learned from previous efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform and outlines challenges that reform proponents will face in the future.

1) The church’s advocacy for U.S. immigration reform is largely focused on family unification; prevention of exploitation and death; and restoring the rule of law. Is this asking too much or too little? (pp. 281-283)
2) Congress has spent approximately $150 billion since 2000 to reduce illegal immigration, yet the number of illegal immigrants grew 50 percent in that time. What are the shortcomings of a policy focused on border enforcement? (p. 238)
3) The church’s response to a border wall is moral economic policies in nations that both send and receive migrants. What can be done on both ends to promote human dignity? (p. 284)
4) What lessons can be learned from the immigration reform battles of 2006 and 2007? If you were in Congress, on which issues, if any, would you be open to compromise? (pp. 284-289)
5) The immigration debate is ultimately about the identity and future of our nation. How would you define your hopes in dialogue with someone who holds views contrary to yours? (p. 289)
6) Churches have played a major role in integrating immigrants into U.S. society. Why is it vital that integration efforts become an official part of our immigration policy? (p. 290)
7) What do you think is the correct balance between border security and welcoming immigrants? (pp. 292-293)
8) Proposals that would grant legal status to undocumented people without providing a path to citizenship could create a permanent underclass. What dangers would this create? (p. 294)
9) Does the debate regarding employment-based visas and family reunification need to be either-or, or can it be both-and? (pp. 294-295)
10) Who are the potential winners and losers in a “future flow” program for migrant workers? (p. 295)

Justice for Immigrants

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops supports immigration reform that:

- Provides a path to citizenship
- Preserves family unity
- Provides legal paths for low-skilled workers to work in the United States
- Restores due process protections to U.S. immigration enforcement policies
- Addresses migration push factors such as persecution and economic disparity

[Click here](#) to learn more about immigration reform and send postcards to your congressional leaders in support of these positions.