

Immigration, National Security and a United World

One response to the challenge of current trends
in United States policy

BY AMY UELMEN

“GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” exhorts the well-known poem which graces the platform of the Statue of Liberty standing in New York Harbor. Over the course of its history, the United States has welcomed more immigrants than any other country—more than 50 million in all—and still admits between 500,000 and 1 million persons a year. That we are “a society of immigrants” is, as President John F. Kennedy put it, “the secret of America: a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dare to explore new frontiers.”

But our immigration history is not without its shadows. Some of the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” have met not a “golden door” but racism, prejudice and fear. Even as the Statute of Liberty, poetically known as “Mother of Exiles,” was mounted on the pedestal in 1886, many were hesitant to hold out the “world-wide welcome” she promised. As early as 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, aimed at preserving the largely European composition of the U.S., suspended immigration from China for sixty years. Through the first half of the twentieth century, quotas encouraged immigration from certain countries while restricting it from others where new arrivals were deemed less able to assimilate into the culture.

And so with each generation: the ideal of a “world-wide welcome” often clashes with the economic and political challenges of the day. In our own time the domestic and international events in the wake of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 have deeply challenged our identity as a “society of immigrants.”

Immediately following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, hundreds of Arab, Muslim and South Asian men were rounded up and held for weeks without charges. Some detainees were subject to verbal and physical abuse, and many were prohibited from any communication with family or with legal counsel.

Beginning in November 2002, males aged 16 to 45 who came from 25 Arab, Muslim and South Asian countries and who had non-permanent immigration status were required to submit to a “special registration” program in which they were photographed, fingerprinted and questioned. Rather than leading to more information about potential terrorist threats, these approaches have only created resentment, fear, and mistrust.

The March 2003 consolidation of immigration services into the Department of Homeland Security is another example of how the extraordinarily complex reality of immigration has been reduced to the single focus of combating terrorism.

What would happen if we looked at immigration not through the lens of fear, but with the eyes of humanity’s destiny





The Question of Immigrants

THE CHURCH IS WELL AWARE OF the problems created by this situation and is committed to spare no effort in developing her own pastoral strategy among these immigrant people, in order to help them settle in their new land and to foster a welcoming attitude among the local population, in the belief that a mutual openness will bring enrichment to all. [...]

The Church in America must be a vigilant advocate, defending against any unjust restriction the natural right of individual persons to move freely within their own nation and from one nation to another. Attention must be called to the rights of migrants and their families and to respect for their human dignity, even in cases of non-legal immigration.

From John Paul II, "The Church in America," January 22, 1999

STELLA VISCHER

"World-Wide Welcome"

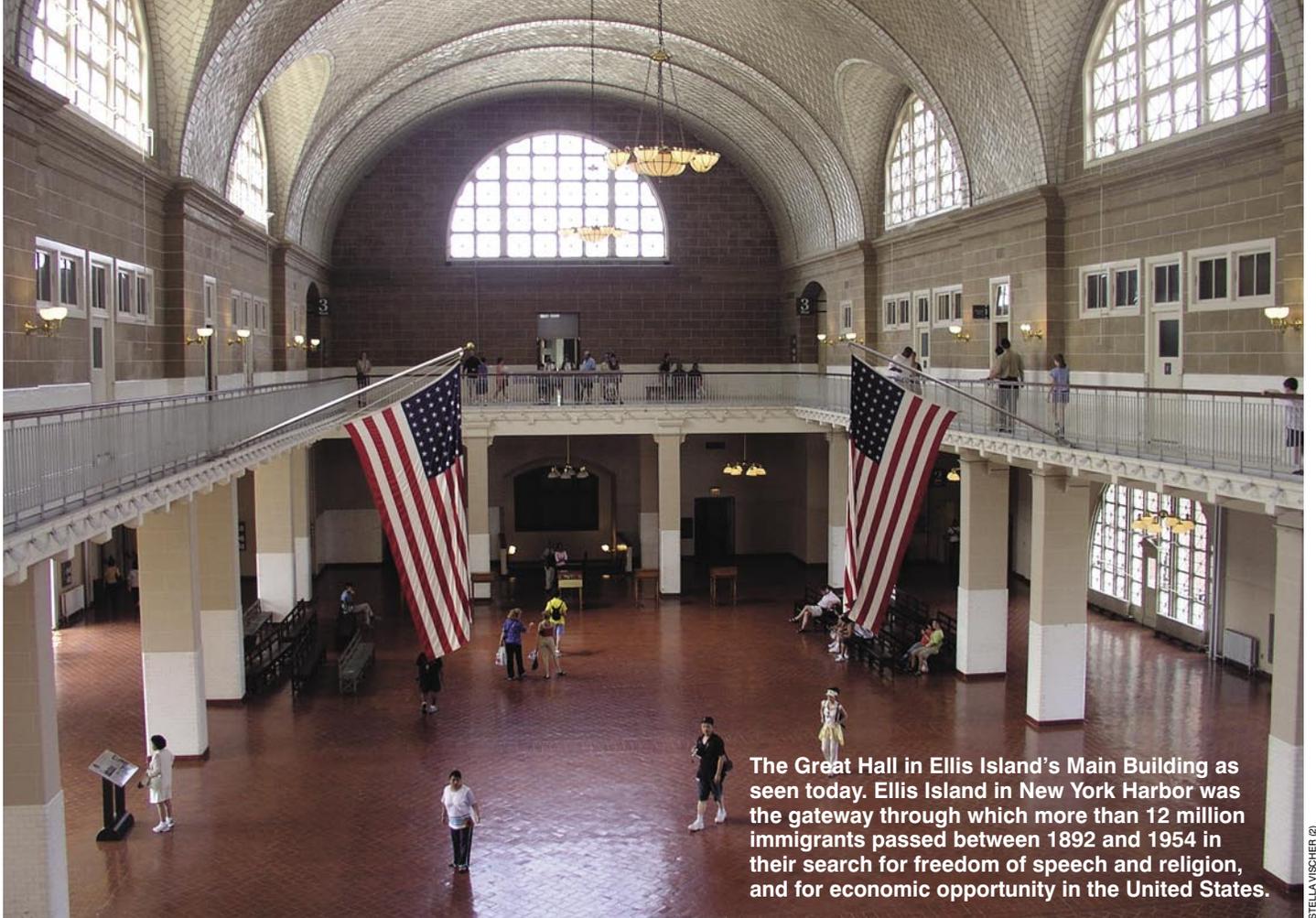
In 1883, Emma Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" to help with fundraising for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. A bronze plaque with the poem was mounted on the pedestal in 1903.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

to live as one family, through the lens of a united world? We may have a better vision to both appreciate the root causes of migration and to formulate the policies which can best serve the common good and protect legitimate security interests.

Borders, of course, will not melt away. As the U.S. and Mexican Bishops recognized in their 2003 joint statement, *Strangers No Longer*, nations do have the right to control their borders, and some aspects of increased security measures may be an appropriate response to credible terrorist threats. A certain tension between the ideal of "world-wide welcome" and the practicalities of legitimate and appropriate border control is inevitable.

However, if we look at immigration through the lens of a united world, and as a path to correspond to Pope John Paul II's invitation to conversion, solidarity and communion as expressed in his 1999 letter to the Church in America, we may be able to find the balance in the tension.



The Great Hall in Ellis Island's Main Building as seen today. Ellis Island in New York Harbor was the gateway through which more than 12 million immigrants passed between 1892 and 1954 in their search for freedom of speech and religion, and for economic opportunity in the United States.

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Conversion

The eyes of a united world give us a new perspective. We no longer see the divisions of “us” or “them” because we are all brothers and sisters, part of the same human family. When we look at immigration policy and enforcement practices with these eyes, we see that it is unacceptable to have an immigration process that subjects our brothers and sisters to punitive laws and harsh treatment, and fails to recognize their human dignity.

We also see clearly the economic, moral and spiritual pressures that families are forced to endure when spouses and children are separated often for years. For example, the spouse or child of a Mexican-born legal permanent resident of the U.S. may wait up to eight years to obtain a visa. A U.S. citizen who petitions for his adult daughter from the Philippines must wait approximately fifteen years before she can join him in the U.S.

And perhaps we can consider with more honesty whether increasingly restrictive immigration policies are truly for the common good and necessary to meet genuine security concerns. On March 17, 2005, a broad coalition of labor, business,

and religious and community leaders gathered to express their agreement on the need for comprehensive immigration reform. Bishop Kevin Farrell’s statement on that occasion summarized the need for “conversion” on many levels: “We can no longer accept a situation in which human beings are exploited or abused,” where immigrants are scapegoated while “at the same time our nation benefits from their labor.”

Solidarity

Looking at immigration through the lens of a united world brings us not only to love our immediate neighbors as brothers and sisters, but also to love the other’s country as we love our own. Through this lens, we can see the phenomenon of migration not only through the perspective of immigrants coming to our own borders, but take to heart the root causes of migration in many countries throughout the globe.

As *Strangers No Longer* states, “All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts” (34). But the real-

ity is that poverty, political instability and persecution make it impossible for many people to live fulfilling or even secure lives in their countries of origin. Through the lens of solidarity, these are no longer the vague and distant problems of other people and other countries—they are our own.

It is not far-fetched to think that the same desperation and hopelessness which forces people to migrate from their homelands could also be a seedbed for terrorist rage. A robust commitment to working together to address the root causes of migration may also be the most promising and direct path to global security.

Communion

Finally, looking at immigration through the lens of a united world brings us to see the coming together of the greatest variety of peoples and cultures in one place not so much as a problem, but as a positive opportunity through which a society may experience the reality of humanity as one family. Even as we recognize that migration is often the result of poverty, inequality and injustice—all evils to be eradicated—we can also appreciate the

positive good that may emerge.

As the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants explained in its 2004 statement, *The Love of Christ Toward Migrants*, “Migration brings together the manifold components of the human family and thus leads to the construction of an ever vaster and more varied society, almost a prolongation of that meeting of peoples and ethnic groups that, through the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, became ecclesial fraternity.”

In a time in which fear often seems to be the dominant force in domestic and international policy, it takes courage to shift our focus toward a broader and more open perspective. But we do have models. In fact, the best example of one who lived the immigrant experience through the lens of a united world is Jesus himself. As an infant he lived as a migrant when his family was forced to flee to Egypt to avoid the persecution of Herod, and he spent his years of ministry as an itinerant preacher with “no place to lay his head” (Lk 9:58).

On an even deeper level, as Focolare founder Chiara Lubich has described, when Jesus became man he came to earth as a “divine immigrant” who not only adapted to the ways of living of the world, but who also brought with him, as a gift for humanity, the customs and culture of heaven, the life of unity in diversity at the heart of the Trinity. Ultimately it is this life that can help us both rise to challenges of immigration, and welcome its gifts. ■

Amy Uelmen is the Director of the Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer’s Work at Fordham University School of Law.

“In Liberty’s Shadow”

I was brought there in handcuffs and shackled to another person. ... At the facility they took away my clothes and gave me an orange prison uniform. I was treated like a criminal. I was kept in a room with 12 other women for 23 hours a day. There was no privacy. We were only taken out of the room for one hour a day; the outdoor recreation area was really like a cage—an internal courtyard with a fence for a roof. ... Every day, guards woke us up at 6 am and told us to stand in a line to be counted. They searched us several times a week.

This young woman is not narrating what happened to her after she had been arrested for a crime. Instead, as reported by Human Rights First in its 2004 Report, *In Liberty’s Shadow*, she tells the story of what followed after she landed in the United States and requested asylum from political persecution in her country.

The U.S. has a long history of providing a safe haven for victims of political and religious persecution. In 1996, however, a new law imposed new procedures including a fast-track deportation proceeding at borders and airports called “expedited removal.”

Under this process, those who request asylum at the border must be detained while they wait for their claims to be processed. Asylum seekers are eligible for “parole” if they can prove a “credible fear” of persecution, as well as their own identity, family or community ties in the U.S., and that they pose no danger to the community.

While proper procedures and safeguards seem to be in place in theory, a comprehensive report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom released in February 2005 found serious and systematic flaws in their implementation. Whether one is granted parole seems to depend not on reasonable criteria,

but on the port of entry and available bed space. For example, in the San Antonio, Texas district, 94% of asylum applicants are released, as compared with the 3.8% released in the Newark, New Jersey district.

As a result of such arbitrary application of procedures, even religious leaders with support of local U.S. communities have been detained for months and in some cases years in jails and jail-like facilities. A 13-year old Iraqi girl spent more than five months in detention before being released to her older brother, a legal U.S. resident.

This practice is in stark contrast with the recommendation of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to insure that refugee and asylum seekers are not treated as criminals. While current legislative agendas do not seem to indicate much positive change, recent human rights and religious freedom reports have done much to raise public awareness and offer concrete solutions. —A.U.

In Liberty’s Shadow (2004) is available at www.HumanRightsFirst.org. The Report on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal (2005) is available at www.uscirf.gov.

“The conduct of a fair asylum process and the maintenance of security are objectives that can both be met. The former need not be sacrificed to the latter.”

From the report “In Liberty’s Shadow”

The U.S. Census 2000 data offered figures about national trends in immigration. While in 1990 3/4 of all immigrants lived in six states (California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New Jersey), 22 other states saw a foreign-born population growth of over 90% by 2000. At present, North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, Arkansas and Utah are the states with the fastest growing immigrant populations.

