



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

*"We are one family under God"*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS:

### Ordinary Time

(August 4 - September 8, 2013)

*"I want to encourage you and your communities to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home."*

—Pope Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers and Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America, April 2008

## SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS

Immigrants who come to the United States, and particularly those who are undocumented, are a particularly vulnerable population who need someone to speak on behalf of their human rights and dignity. Our moral tradition calls on all people of faith and goodwill to stand up in defense of life and human dignity; it is a fundamental calling for us as Catholics. Scripture speaks repeatedly of the migration experience, from Abraham who was sent out from his homeland in the Old Testament, to the Holy Family who fled Herod and lived their lives for a time as refugees in a foreign land. When the scriptural or liturgical texts address migration and themes related to it, whether on a special occasions or on regular Sundays, the homily can be an effective moment for prophetic instruction and encouragement. The Lenten season provides an opportune moment to highlight the Church's mandate and tradition of welcome, outreach and service, and to invite others to participate in this calling.

### **Suggestions for Homilists: August and September, 2013**

Throughout the month of August and into September, the weekly readings highlight the temporal character of existence and the importance that we not place too much trust in worldly goods. In recalling the temporal nature and, in doing so, recognizing the relative character of the goods of the earth, we must also guard against identifying too closely with the artificial divisions that separate one person from another, divisions that become visible too often with respect to things like economic class or national origin. Regardless of where we come from or how much money we have in the bank, we must always behave towards others in such a way that respects their human dignity. We are called on to follow the path that God laid out for us and heed to the example of Christ, who "endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb 12:1-4).

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The temporal nature of the world and the often arbitrary divisions that cut us off from one another has relevance to discussions related to migration. Consider, for example, the readings from the first Sunday of August and some of the themes that the parish priest can draw on with respect to the Church's migration message.

The first reading on August 4 highlights the conviction that in Christ we are one body. Here Saint Paul emphasizes that in Christ there is not "Greek and Jew... barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all." (Lk 12) We as Christians must be careful not to create arbitrary and false divisions that separate us from others. The unity that we find in Christ supersedes any earthly divisions that might be constructed: divisions by race, by sex, and by nationality included. Elsewhere, it is worth recalling, is Saint Paul's assertion that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This is not to say that these divisions are completely superfluous or irrelevant to our identity in this world, but that they cannot blind us to the common humanity that each of us share as a creature of God. This includes how we encounter and treat the stranger who lives among us.

The Gospel message for this week provides a complementary perspective to the message illicit in the earlier readings. Here Jesus warns us against living like the rich man who had a bountiful harvest and who decided to store it up and spend the rest of his days eating, drinking, and making merry; little did he know that such plans would come to naught, as God would demand of him his life that very night. In the verses following this story, which are picked up on in the next week's readings, Jesus reiterates this theme and calls on his disciples to seek out inexhaustible treasures in Heaven rather than clinging to the riches of this world. How do we do this? Certainly not by hoarding the goods of the earth for our own pleasure, but by selling all we have and by giving alms (Lk:12:33), by the feeding the poor, visiting those imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty, and by welcoming the stranger (Mt 25).

Welcoming the migrant and migration more broadly has a central place in the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Stories in both the Old and the New Testament highlight the fact that in providing hospitality to the stranger we might also be unwittingly entertaining angels (Heb 13:2; Gen 18:1-15). Abraham unknowingly provides hospitality to the Lord in Mamre helped secure he and Sara a child. Not only did Abraham show such hospitality, but he himself was once a migrant. The Letter to the Hebrews, read during the second Sunday of August, highlights the story of Abraham who, by faith, "obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country." (Heb 11). It might be worth reminding those at Mass that our very faith has its roots by the decision made by one man, Abraham--a migrant--who decided to follow God's command to travel to a foreign land. Who knows what plans God might have for each migrant that we meet on the street, who moves into our community, or begins to attend Mass at our local parish?

The readings for the first Sunday in September issue yet another challenge. Here Jesus tells us that when we throw a banquet, we should not invite our relatives or wealthy neighbors, "but the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind" (Lk 14). Does this have any bearing on policies that are put into place with respect to migration? If so, what? What it does not mean is that we are obligated to invite all of the world's poor into the country and disregard well-being of those who are already here. Rather this passage invites us to reflect on



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the degree to which we, in our surplus, provide to those who live in a state of deficit (who can throw a banquet except those with enough money to do so?). Where we are able to provide support and care for the poor and the downtrodden out of our excess, we are obligated to help. It is for this reason that we must balance the demands of the common good of our country, while responding to the needs of those standing on the outside who can benefit from our wealth. This can mean that we should implement a generous immigration policy that enables people to come and work and try to earn a better living than they might have available to them in their homeland. This might also mean that we turn our attention to the developing world and try to help these countries, through such mechanisms as foreign aid and humane trade agreements, to build up their economy so that their citizenry can find work their and not have to leave their families and communities to find it elsewhere.

The readings scheduled to be read on September 8 bring to a head many of the themes that are expressed in the weeks immediately preceding it. In the Gospel reading for these week, Jesus turns to a crowd that follows him and states that, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." This command is not meant to be taken in a literal sense but as a warning that we must commit ourselves completely to God, even if such commitment comes at the expense of our human relationships, our biases, and our loyalties to social and political structures with which we identify, particularly insofar as any of those commitment might cause division between ourselves and our relationship with God. In other words, it is crucial to constantly reevaluate whether or not we are living out the Gospel message or if our daily life undermining our ability to do so. In the context of contentious policy issues such as migration, how do we approach this issue and through what lens do we analyze the intricacies of the debate? Do we make an abstraction of the "illegal" immigrant--turning him into an other, an invader, and unwelcome--all at the expense of his humanity? Do we reject migrants instead of welcoming them as the Gospel repeatedly commands us to do? Scripture rarely provides black and white answers to tough political problems, but it should shape our attitudes and our perspectives on the way in which law affects such things as human dignity and the common good. Where it undermines either, the law should be adjusted. It is crucial that wherever we fall on the immigration debate we as Catholics must, as Pope Benedict XVI noted in his address to the bishops of the United States in 2012, "with great generosity continue to welcome waves of new immigrants, to provide them with pastoral care and charitable assistance, and to support ways of regularizing their situation, especially with regard to the unification of families. A particular sign of this is the long-standing commitment of the American Bishops to immigration reform." For those who disagree with the bishops, it is imperative that they wrestle with the underlying logic and vision that the bishops have brought to this commitment.

### **Challenge Parishioners Assumptions about Migration**

Highlight interesting facts and statistics in your homily to challenge prejudices and inform people about important demographic changes taking place in our country, including the growing anti-immigrant sentiment and media misinformation. Too often the media messages that we hear in relation to migrants is distorted and provides a false understanding of who migrants are and why they come. The rhetoric surrounding this issue can easily bias people in ways that do not properly appreciate the benefits that migrants can bring to our communities. Teach people about what the Church's rich body of social thought says about our Christian



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responsibility to "welcome the stranger among us."

### **Scripture, The Church's Moral Tradition, And the Teaching of the Bishops**

Catholic concern for migrants and refugees has a strong foundation in Scripture. The Old and New Testaments poignantly depict Moses and the Jewish people in exile and the Holy Family as an archetype for refugees everywhere. The obstacles to a hearty welcome (fear of the stranger, prejudice, competition, sense of loss) also find counterparts in the parables of Jesus and in His capacity to break through the taboos and restrictions of his contemporaries, especially in regard to tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, and Gentiles. These scriptural teachings call us to a deeper compassion for the plight of the migrant. Inspired by this calling of our faith, the Church has developed a rich body of teaching and a heritage of concern for immigrants, migrants, and refugees. Our Biblical tradition reminds us that in welcoming the stranger we are welcoming Christ (Mt 25:35). Catholics are thus called to work for the conversion of hearts and minds and, in doing so, to create a culture and practice of hospitality in communities receiving newly arriving migrants.

The Catholic faithful in the United States—a land so blessed and whose tradition is steeped in the migrant experience—have special responsibility to be a welcoming people. In the pastoral letter, *Strangers no Longer: A Journey of Hope*, the bishops remind us that Church must provide for the religious and spiritual needs of newly arriving immigrants and refugees and ensure that the sacraments and the full life of the Church are made available to people living in these communities, regardless of their legal status. Second, the Church must help to provide for the material needs of immigrants and their communities. For this reason, the bishops call on local parishes and other Catholic institutions to develop a network of social services for migrants and their families as they transition to their new life in America and, where possible, to provide affordable or free legal services to assist in the often arduous immigration process, particularly for those who are caught up in detention.