

HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT – C

On a Sunday morning in February, 26 years ago, I preached a sermon in which I told the people of Fairview Grace United Methodist Church that I would be leaving them to become a Roman Catholic. I shared with them that it had become clear to me that this was what God was calling me to do, and that as a person who preached about responding to God in faith every week I had to follow where God was leading me. The people of that congregation were kind, supportive, and gave me a wonderful send off, though I'm sure most of them wondered what kind of craziness had gotten into me since I had no idea where I would be going, what I would be doing or how I would be supporting my family.

Still I left them for the strange new world of Roman Catholicism, being received into the Church soon thereafter. But the welcome into this new world wasn't quite as warm and affirming as the sendoff had been. Though I had a good bit of education and experience that was well suited for work in the Church, few people were willing to consider me as a suitable candidate for teaching or pastoral work. It seemed that many were skeptical that I could really have a grasp of the Catholic faith, though my conversion had been the result of several years of study and spiritual guidance. Some gave the impression that they were afraid that I would undermine the faith of Catholics somehow, though in reality I probably knew more about the Catholic faith and its traditions and was more respectful of them than were most life-long Catholics. Of course, I realized that there were certain things about Catholic life and culture that one can only understand by actually being one for awhile. But still I thought I had things to offer.

Thankfully, there were a few people who thought so too and were willing to serve as advocates. I was hired as a religion teacher at a Catholic high school and then at the Josephinum. I began to do some work for the diocese of Columbus, implementing what were then the *new* rights of Christian initiation for adults. And as my gifts were recognized and people started to get to know me as a person, I was given more and more opportunities to serve the Church. Finally, the Holy Father approved my petition to be ordained a priest.

But this road hasn't been an easy one. I remember one woman coming up to me when she learned I was going to be ordained a priest and saying with obvious disgust, "You're not really going to go through with this are you?" And when the day of ordination came, there were a few protesters with signs outside the Cathedral. And though, for the most part people have treated me wonderfully well wherever I've served, there are still comments made quite often that remind me that I am still something of an alien in this community of faith. There continue to be certain restrictions placed upon my ministry. And there are still moments when the consequences of my immigration into this community of faith leave me feeling a bit awkward or uncomfortable, like a couple months ago when at the conference on marriage for all the priests of the Ohio dioceses, I was the only married one in the bunch. I'm sure that this is something like some of our catechumens and candidates must feel when they are paraded before the church each week and sent out to reflect on the word as they await the time when they will be received into full communion. There is a bit of awkwardness to it, though each of them knows that this is what God is calling them to do.

Now I want to make it clear that none of this is being said by way of complaint. I am thankful to have been given a place in this Church and that I can do some good. And I really do appreciate the many kindnesses that have been extended to me. I know our catechumens and candidates do to. But one thing my experience of coming into the Church has done for me is to increase my compassion for immigrants of any kind – those who have sought out new church communities or those who have left their homes and journeyed to new lands for the sake of God, family, safety or survival.

And the truth is that we should all have compassion for immigrants because most all of us here today are either immigrants ourselves or are the descendents of immigrants. Many of us who have looked into our family histories have learned of some of the great hardships endured by our ancestors when, leaving their native countries because of religious or ethnic violence and oppression, or the devastating effects of poverty on their families, or simply because God planted a dream in them of a better life, they came to this land. It was tough going for many of them. Immigration is seldom easy for those immigrating or for those who must make a place for them, though the potential benefits for everyone are great. But because we are a land of immigrants, and because we know what great things our immigrant forebears have done for us, how can we have anything but a genuine compassion for immigrants now and a willingness to do what we can to see that they are treated justly.

In fact, our reading from Deuteronomy today reminds us that all of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition are the descendents of those that God called to leave their homeland and journey to a far country. We are all the spiritual descendents of those who fled to Egypt to keep from starving when an extended drought had made it impossible to produce food in their own land. We are the spiritual descendents of those who fled from Egypt after they had been enslaved and oppressed for generations. In fact, it was God himself who led this immigration from Egypt, through the sea and the desert into a new land where these beleaguered people could have a better life. So how can we not have a heart for immigrants?

To deny just and compassionate treatment to immigrants is to deny our very selves and the God who makes and has a special love for immigrants. That's why the American bishops are calling us to speak up and support immigration reform. The bishops' call for reform is both compassionate and just. They make it clear that our country has an obligation to preserve the safety of its citizens by documenting and doing the necessary background checks on those who would come to live and work here. But they also call for the compassionate and just treatment of those who seek refuge and a means to provide for their families. They are calling our government officials to pass legislation that will enable families to stay together. They are calling for a process to enable those who are here illegally to establish legal residency and contribute to our society in an open and responsible way. You can pick up materials in the vestibule after Mass today that outline in detail the bishops' proposals along with post cards addressed to our elected officials urging them to reform our country's immigration policies.

In the gospel today Jesus met the devil in the desert. It was no accident that the Spirit led Jesus there to be tempted by the devil. The desert held special significance for his people. God led them through the desert to the Promised Land in one of the greatest immigrations the world has ever known. On this journey God made himself known to Israel as one who championed the cause of the poor, the oppressed and the powerless. He revealed himself to be the friend of those who were desperate to find a better life. Jesus' time in the desert reminded him of who God is and who we are called to be as his people. By calling us to join them in this postcard campaign for immigration reform, our bishops are doing the same for us today.

Fr. Rod Damico
February 21, 2010