

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 7, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Tough Topic: Immigration Reform

“Migrants trust that they will encounter acceptance, solidarity, and help, that they will meet people who will sympathize with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognize the values and resources the latter have to offer, and are open to sharing humanly and materially with the needy and disadvantaged.” Pope Francis

I would like to share with each of you some thoughts and reflections on one of the hot button topics in our country if not the world today. I know that there will be some who will disagree with me and what I have to say, but I feel compelled to say them out of love and with the hope that somehow I may contribute even in the smallest way to the building up of God’s kingdom.

A few years ago, I decided to tackle the topic of illegal immigration in one of my Sunday homilies. My homily was mostly a word for word restatement of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishop’s suggested plan for comprehensive immigration reform. Immediately after Mass, a man ran up to me and started yelling at me and telling me that I had no right to preach about the issue of immigration because I was basically encouraging people to break the law. I resisted my first instincts to tell the man that I was ordained by the Church and I could preach whatever the hell I wanted to and instead I let the man rant and rave for about ten minutes. Finally towards the end of his angry monologue he told me that his brother had been involved in an accident and had been seriously injured and the driver of the other car had been an illegal immigrant. As the man told me about his brother, I could not help but feel that if I was in his shoes I would probably feel the same way. The anger that he had directed at me (and the issue of illegal immigration) was a misdirected anger. He was angry at the driver who just happened to be an illegal immigrant but since he could not express his anger or reconcile with that individual he consciously or subconsciously decided to vent his anger at all illegal immigrants and anyone who may support their cause(s). I ended the conversation by simply stating that I would pray for him and his brother and he ended the conversation by storming off. When dialoguing about tough and divisive issue I think it is important to realize that many of us approach these issues with a lot of emotional energy that can cloud our judgement.

The second thing I think is important to clarify before we begin is we must not confuse what is legal with what is moral. This should be obvious for Catholics for we know that abortion is currently legal but it is not moral. The Church encourages us to obey as many laws as possible but we should never do anything immoral.

Finally, I think that it is safe to say that many of the problems we face in the world today including the issue of illegal immigration are complex issues which will take time and a number of steps in order to correct.

Before we dive into the Church’s solution to the problem of illegal immigration in the United States, let us take a better look at how the Church sees the problem. (Quotes from the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font)

1. Most of this unauthorized flow comes from Mexico, a nation struggling with severe poverty, where it is often impossible for many to earn a living wage and meet the basic needs of their families. Survival has thus become the primary impetus for unauthorized immigration flows into the United States. Today’s unauthorized immigrants are largely low-skilled workers who come to the United States for work to support their families.

I think it is safe to say that the Church sees most illegal immigrants not as criminals or terrorists but more like Jean Valjean in Les Miserables. Jean Valjean’s character in the famous musical commits the crime of stealing a loaf of bread only for the noble purpose of feeding his starving sister and her young child. If it was not for the crushing poverty he is in Jean would not have stolen the loaf of bread.

In light of all of this, many unauthorized consider the prospect of being apprehended for crossing illegally into the United States a necessary risk. Even after being arrested and deported, reports indicate that many immigrants attempt to re-enter the United States once again in the hope of bettering their lives.

Adding to this very human dilemma is the potentially dangerous nature of crossing the Southern border. Smugglers looking to take advantage of would-be immigrants extort them for exorbitant sums of money and then transport them to the U.S. under perilous conditions. Other immigrants have opted to access the U.S. by crossing through the Southwest's treacherous deserts. As a result, thousands of migrants have tragically perished in such attempts from heat exposure, dehydration, and drowning.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
January 14, 2017
Spiritual Ponderings
Tough Topic Immigration Reform

As we dive deeper into the issue of illegal immigration and how to reform the system, I would like to present to you today the Catholic Church's five point program. I think you will discover that there are many things you will agree with and many things that you will find challenging. This is to be expected though because we Christians are called to move from our earthly mindsets and to think in more Christ like way. (Quotes from the Bishop Program will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font).

1. Earned Legalization: An earned legalization program would allow foreign nationals of good moral character who are living in the United States to apply to adjust their status to obtain lawful permanent residence. Such a program would create an eventual path to citizenship, requiring applicants to complete and pass background checks, pay a fine, and establish eligibility for resident status to participate in the program. Such a program would help stabilize the workforce, promote family unity, and bring a large population "out of the shadows," as members of their communities.

The first step is for us, according to the Bishops (our modern day apostles), to treat those who are already in this country as brothers and sisters in Christ and thus make it easier for them to correct their status and to reunite their families.

2. Future Worker Program: A worker program to permit foreign-born workers to enter the country safely and legally would help reduce illegal immigration and the loss of life in the American desert. Any program should include workplace protections, living wage levels, safeguards against the displacement of U.S. workers, and family unity.

The second step is to create a fair worker program that would help American employers get the workers they need (study migrant farm workers to understand the need better) and would help prevent immigrants from being taken advantage of by others.

3. Family-based Immigration Reform: It currently takes years for family members to be reunited through the family-based legal immigration system. This leads to family breakdown and, in some cases, illegal immigration. Changes in family-based immigration should be made to increase the number of family visas available and reduce family reunification waiting times.

Major effort should go into keeping families together. St. John Paul II's quote about the family summarizes the importance the Catholic Church puts on families. "As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live."

4. Restoration of Due Process Rights: Due process rights taken away by the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) should be restored. For example, the three and ten year bars to reentry should be eliminated.

Our rights as Catholics depend more on the fact that we were born human and in the image and likeness of God than on where we were born. All human beings deserve the right to justice.

5. Addressing Root Causes: Congress should examine the root causes of migration, such as under-development and poverty in sending countries, and seek long-term solutions. The antidote to the problem of illegal immigration is sustainable economic development in sending countries. In an ideal world, migration should be driven by choice, not necessity.

The ultimate solution to the problem of illegal immigration is for all of us to realize that we are a part of a larger world and that we are called to love all our brothers and sisters to the best of our abilities. People should never be forced to move for economic reasons or because of political/religious persecution.

***Enforcement: The U.S. Catholic Bishops accept the legitimate role of the U.S. government in intercepting unauthorized migrants who attempt to travel to the United States. The Bishops also believe that by increasing lawful means for migrants to enter, live, and work in the United States, law enforcement will be better able to focus upon those who truly threaten public safety: drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and would-be terrorists. Any enforcement measures must be targeted, proportional, and humane.**

**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
January 21, 2017
Spiritual Ponderings
Tough Topic: Pro-Life and Fear**

Last October, I had the privilege of preaching at the Respect Life Convention. For my spiritual ponderings today, I would like to share with you that homily.

I was ordained to the priesthood on Memorial Day weekend, but I would not begin my first assignment as a priest to nearly a month later. I arrived at my first assignment full of excitement and energy. My pastor handed me the keys to the parish and then began his month long vacation. I remember praying before I went to sleep that night hoping that the “emergency line”, a special extension set up in order to get in touch with a priest after office hours, would not ring. Around two o’clock in the morning the phone rang and I answered it. As I answered the phone, I remember simultaneously praying and hoping that the phone call was not about a sick child. Once again though God did not answer my prayer for it was about a one-year-old who was dying of cancer. She was not expected to make it through the night.

I quickly got dressed and drove to the hospital. The whole time, I kept trying to figure out what I was going to say. I do not remember much of what happen that night except, I know that I did not do much of the talking. The young girls parents with an amazing faith told me of their loving daughter and of the pain they were feeling and then they told me something that has always stuck with me. They said that if they would have to do it all over again with all the pain and heartache that they would because they loved their daughter that much.

Jenna would make it through the night, her little body fighting off the staff infection. Getting to know little Jenna over the next few months was a great blessing. One of my favorite memories of being is a priest was the opportunity to celebrate Mass with Jenna and her family in their home at the suggestion of my pastor.

I can still recall with vivid details sitting in the back of the Church praying before the all school Mass that I was about to celebrate when Jenna’s father walked in and informed that Jenna had passed away. I prayed with him for a moment and then began Mass. I was so broken up that when I could not remember my homily and so I simply asked the children to join me in praying a “Hail Mary” for Jenna.

A few years later, I found myself in the back of the parish Church as the 6PM Youth Mass was about to come to an end. I had not been the celebrant that evening, but I wanted to greet the people as they left the Church. As I walked into the Church, I caught sight of Ann. Ann was a person in the parish that I had wanted to introduce myself to for some time because I had known her husband Ken pretty well from working with him, as he was a core member for our youth

ministry program. Ann and Ken had three children and at this time Ann was standing in the back of the Church trying to keep their youngest quiet. For some reason that night, though, I chickened out and never introduced myself to her. The next day as I received a call because Ann had been diagnosed that morning with terminal cancer and Ann was told that she only had three months to live at most. I traveled down to the hospital and spent the rest of day with Ken and Ann.

Over the next three months, I would spend a lot of time with Ann as she prepared to move onto the next life. I can remember one time Ann and I were talking and she told me that she used to hate her husband Ken because when he got into the car he could listen to any radio station that he wanted to but when she got into the car she had to listen to Barney the Dinosaur and the Wiggles. She went on to tell me how now she realized how silly she had been and that she would do almost anything to be in her car driving her children around listening to those children's songs over and over again.

One day as if she was reading my mind, she told me that even though the cancer was painful she would not go back if she could and shorten her time through suicide for she now in a special way saw time as a treasure and she was going to enjoy every moment she could with her husband, children, and the rest of her family. (to be Continued)

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
January 28, 2017
Spiritual Ponderings
Pro-Life and Fear

Here is the second part of my homily from the Respect Life Convention.

A few years later, my own grandmother would begin to suffer more and more from dementia and Alzheimer. It was very painful to watch this once independent woman suffer the way she did. During this time my mother did her best to take care of her and my mother would ask me from time to time to come over and stay with her for an hour so that my mother could get out of the house .

There was a large part of me that did not want to because seeing my grandmother reminded me of my fears. My fear of being helpless, of not being in control, of being pitied, etc. and there were times that I almost told my mother "no". In the end, I did spend a lot of time with my grandmother and there are some moments from these visits that I treasure the most. For example, I can remember one time we were sitting in the living room and watching television when my grandmother turned to me and asked me where my children were. This surprised me greatly because she knew that I was a priest and that I did not have children. I spent ten minutes trying to convince her of that fact. In the end I just gave in and told my grandmother that my supposed children were at home with my supposed wife. This calmed my grandmother down for about ten minutes. She then turned to me a second time and asked me where my children were. Not wishing to argue with her, I told her that they were at home with my wife. She then shot me this look of disappointment and proceeded to inform me that priests should not have children. I could not help but laugh for at this time because I could not win for losing.

I chose these three stories from my life to illustrate to you that being Pro-Life for me has had nothing to do with philosophical arguments of when life begin but rather my being Pro-Life has had everything to do with overcoming fear. I can imagine no greater pain in life than to lose a child. This knowledge of the pain comes from having lost my older sister when she was four and I was two and from listening to my mother pour her heart out to me in later years. Jenna's parents though were willing to bravely face this pain because of the love they had for their daughter. In our world today many men and women are choosing to have an abortion because they are afraid of how a child is going to "mess up" their lives especially if this child has a developmental disorder or fatal disease. Jenna's parents' brave declaration that they would be willing to do it all over again teaches us that human life is worth all the troubles it may bring because a human life is priceless. I know Jenna's smiles and hand holding made me and others love her instantly. We never saw the illness but rather the precious gift that she was. We just had to overcome our fears to get to know her.

Watching Ann suffer was not a pleasant experience but learning from her how to be grateful for the small things, helped me have courage to walk with her and later with my grandmother as they neared death. Doing so, though, meant that I really had to face my own fears and not only the fear of death.

Death in some sense did not scare me. What scares me is the fear of losing control and being so vulnerable. It takes courage to see that God can still use us in our terminal illness. Ann courageously taught me so much and she continued to love her family with every ounce of strength she had until it was her time to go. She bravely held nothing back from her family.

Finally, when I hear people say “quality of life” in regards to euthanasia, I cannot help but think of that person as being a coward. It is easy to blame the person with dementia for the way that we are feeling and it is much harder to look inside and see the fear of death, of not being in control, and of being vulnerable as our desires.

A priest who had battled cancer for most of his life once described illness/sickness as returning to our greatest but simplest dignity – that of being a child of God. My grandmother could not do much for herself but she still taught me a lot and brought great joy to my heart when I bravely overcame my fears and allowed myself to spend time with her.

These experiences and others have allowed me to come to the conclusion that the greatest enemy in the Pro-Life movement is fear. Perhaps this is why Gabriel when informing Mary of God’s plan for her to have a child out wedlock began with “Do not be afraid.”

As we leave this Mass, this convention, and enter back into the battle for life, let us remember to treat the people that we find ourselves at odds with over the issue of life not as the enemy but rather as victims of fear. When we are on the sidewalk outside plan parenthood let us make sure to offer everyone that passes by a smile so that people everywhere will know that we care about them and want what is best for them. When we find ourselves in a heated argument over life issues let us keep in mind our goal is not to win the argument but rather to help the person we are arguing with choose life by reminding them that we care about them also and we desire to help them face their fears. When we encounter those, who are suffering from their sins against life let us offer them not only Gods mercy but our own as well. Finally when we see others struggling because they chose life let us assist them in their struggles – showing them gratitude for having a large family – offering support as they struggle with taking care of elderly relatives – and more.

Let us instead have the courage to face our fears and help others face their fears when it comes to life issues. May we help those in crisis pregnancies, difficult pregnancies, and other situations where life is threatened to no longer be afraid. When fear is defeated life will be victorious.

