

Church speaks up for refugees, immigrants

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan

No country in the world has a more sterling reputation for welcoming refugees and immigrants than the United States of America.

Unless one can proudly claim to come purely from the Native Americans, every single citizen is a descendant of ancestors who came to the United States from somewhere else, freely and with great hope (or tragically in shackles and in bondage). Our national monument, the Statue of Liberty, reminds us of the welcome given the refugees and immigrants of the world by America.

No church in the world has a more sparkling fame for greeting and helping settle those millions who have come here searching for a fresh, free, secure start than the church whose very name, catholic, means universal, all-embracing, expansive.

Just this week, I was enjoying a ride through a section of the archdiocese with a guest from Nigeria, and I was pointing out the different parishes and churches that historically were — and are — the first homes of immigrants: among them German, Polish, Hispanic, Italian, Irish, Slovak, Slovenian, Hmong, and Korean, as well as the parishes now known as home to the descendants of slaves. He was speechless at this testimony to the diverse character of Catholicism in America.

If an American by his/her nature should have a special sensitivity to the welcome historically given the refugee in this country we now proudly call home, and if a Catholic should inherit a tradition of embracing the immigrant, well, one would expect an American Catholic to be on the frontlines of those who welcome, care for, and protect those thousands who still come here longing for a home and an opportunity.

Wherever you would find people, programs, and services to immigrants, you would legitimately expect to find American Catholics involved. Whenever you would discover cases where refugees were being mistreated or threatened, you would rightly anticipate the church to speak-up on their behalf.

That's why the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is constantly advocating for immigrants and refugees in Washington, and why our Wisconsin Catholic Conference also works hard on their behalf in Madison.

Thank God this is indeed the case in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Throughout southeastern Wisconsin, one finds the church, through Catholic Charities, in our parish programs, in projects of welcome and resettlement, vigorously involved in ministry to refugees and immigrants.

I had only been archbishop a week when, at Principe de Paz Parish, a gentlemen from Mexico, with tears in his eyes, introduced me to his wife and two children, telling me that, thanks to a service of the archdiocese, he obtained proper documentation, and was able to bring his wife and children here. Alleluia!

That's why it should startle none of us that the parish community of St. Mary in Hales Corners would come together to support one of its own members, Regina Bakala, a wife and mother, who came here as a refugee from the Congo, and is now being threatened with a forced return. (See story, Page 9.) While we recognize there are necessary laws that must be respected, we also defend the human rights of a woman who now wonders if the words on the Statue of Liberty are a



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sham.

About three decades ago, I heard the renowned urban activist and community organizer, Fr. Geno Baroni — who held a high position in the Carter Administration — preach at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. He claimed that Catholics in America looked to two special women as models and guides in their social outreach: Lady Liberty, the statue in New York Harbor, who symbolizes a warm welcome to anyone who comes to the United States longing for a safe, secure, free home; and Our Blessed Lady, who gave birth to her son, the savior of the world, while away from home, who had to flee as a refugee to Egypt to protect her baby, and who is cherished in our Catholic imagination as a mother of every color, feature, and language known to humanity.

No wonder, Fr. Baroni concluded, that Catholics of America are especially attuned to the needs of immigrants and refugees, since they are sons and daughters of those two towering ladies.

After all, as the Son of that blessed Lady taught, “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me.”

<http://www.chnonline.org/current/heraldofhope.html>