

Transcript of Part 1
Immigration—Politics and Experience

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by
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Thanks very much to Professor Regan. Thanks also to Melinda Donovan and Dean Stegman for this invitation to join you all this evening. I've appreciated opportunities to collaborate with the STM upon my return to Boston College two years ago. And thanks to all of you for coming out tonight. It's Election Day, post-midterms, pre-holiday crunch. I'm, I'm grateful that you're here.

And actually, concerns about immigration featured in in some of the ads surrounding today's races, particularly in Virginia and New Jersey races, we heard about concerns about immigrants. So I think this is particularly timely to speak this evening, because in my view, immigration really is one of the most urgent signs of our times. And I think this rich tradition of reflection on justice for immigrants can promote a shared good for citizens and newcomers alike.

I think really the time is ripe here in the United States for resources from Catholic ethics to shape discourse about immigration, and I hope offer a counter narrative to the myths that dominate our airwaves. Significant changes brought by President Donald Trump during the first year of his presidency directly reflect his campaign rhetoric that cast immigrants and refugees as threats to the United States. Trump campaigned on promises to deport undocumented immigrants and secure the border with Mexico, a country he charged with sending its criminals, drug dealers, and rapists.

He moved swiftly to make good on campaign promises, issuing executive orders within the first few weeks of his presidency that called for constructing a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, a selective travel ban, and expansion of the nation's detention capacity and expedited removal practices. They also expand those targeted for deportation to include anyone immigration officers judge to pose a risk to public safety or national security.

While the courts contest elements of the order's legal legitimacy, enforcement raids have ensued in at least 20 states, including here in Massachusetts, as you know. Last week, acting Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, director Tom Holman reported he has instructed Homeland Security to quintuple worksite enforcement actions next year.

The administration's internal enforcement measures and accompanying rhetoric have fanned the flames of nationalism, sowed fear in immigrant communities, and eroded civic

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life. As Catholic and wider resistance has underscored, these moves threaten to harm already vulnerable asylum seekers and divide families of mixed immigration status.

In the name of safeguarding national security, further militarization of the border treats symptoms rather than causes of migration. The U.S. government already spends more on federal immigration enforcement than all other criminal law enforcement agencies combined. And the death toll of migrants crossing the deserts of the Southwest has steadily mounted even as crossings decline.

The bottom photo shows Attorney General Jeff Sessions at the border expanding prosecution procedures for immigrants, whereas the Obama administration initially deported those immigrants who had committed only minor offences. And perhaps you know he deported more than all other twentieth century presidents combined. It altered its policy to target primarily those convicted of serious crimes or who had violated deportation orders.

By September of this year, ICE agents had made 43% more arrests since Trump took office, compared to the same period last year. And whereas deportations are not quite on track to exceed last year's numbers, ICE took into custody nearly three times more removable non-citizens without these criminal records during the same period in 2016. And here at the border in Nogales, Sessions referred to "taking our stand against this filth."

So I have to confess, I have found these political characterizations a bit out of step with my own experiences and encounters with immigrants. So I'd like to begin my reflections this evening with some from the border rather than the White House. As my relationships there have been formative for my own research, and folks working there continue their outreach and advocacy no matter which direction the political winds blow.

So the Kino Border Initiative is a bi-national known project of the Jesuit Refugee Service, the California and Mexican provinces of the Jesuits, the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, and the two bordering dioceses there in Ambos Nogales. During my last visit there, I spoke with recently-deported migrants at their aid center.

One gentleman had spent 26 of his last 27 years in central California, brought there as a one-year-old by his uncle. He had worked harvesting pistachios and almonds to support his wife and four U.S. citizen children. Even on the occasions he couldn't provide a driver's license for a routine stop, he had had no trouble. But then in the two prior years, each such stop had landed him in jail with a third resulting in his deportation there to Nogales. He expressed dread at starting over in a country foreign to him.

Up the road at Casa Nazaret, we sat with women who had been deported but were attempting to try the journey north again, in spite of the dangers that posed. The women at the shelter were simply desperate to be reunited with their families in the U.S. One had worked at a Motel 6 in Arizona for many years supporting her two citizen children after her husband had left them. And describing her initial reason for leaving home she said, "In southern Mexico, at home either you eat or you send your kids to school."

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The Nazaret House residents repeatedly broke into tears as they shared experiences of being separated from their children, and also experiences in detention. Closer to home at my previous position at Santa Clara University, I encountered undocumented students really struggling with impossible choices.

I begin this recent book with one who recounts how a month after her high school graduation, ICE agents with loaded guns, bullet proof vests, and steel-toed boots surrounded her house, pounding down the door, demanding to see her. As she tells it, "I came out to the front yard where the head agent asked my name while pulling out handcuffs as if standing in front of some criminal. No GPA or a letter of recommendation could save me then. I fell to my knees in front of the agent and began pleading with him to let me stay, telling him I was starting college in a month on a special scholarship. He said, 'Fine, I'll let you go. But only if you tell me where your dad is.'"

When her mortified mother nodded yes to go ahead and tell him, the student revealed the information and ICE left to arrest her dad at his workplace in front of his boss and coworkers and deport him. The student reflects, "I stood in complete disbelief. I had sold out my own dad for an education."

So experiences like these where questions of citizenship and enforcement tactics take on flesh and blood have shaped my reflection about the Christian narrative in light of migration and globalization. Ours is an era of unprecedented migration, and President Trump inherited an outdated system, issuing from decades of congressional inaction.

When residents are confronted with newcomers, some reactions reflect the nation's historic openness to outsiders, and others, its deep ambivalence. Legitimate concerns regarding disproportionate burdens on local services and the need to set workable limits or safeguards understandably persist. At the same time, mounting threats to human dignity indicate that urgency of the system's genuine overhaul.