A PROMISED LAND,

A PERILOUS JOURNEY

Theological Perspectives on Migration

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The fact that thousands of migrants have died along the U.S.-Mexico border, and many more die each day, challenges all of us to ask why so many people suffer such injustice today.\(^1\) History shows that people have trouble accepting those who they consider to be fundamentally “other” than themselves. While it took the United States centuries to officially acknowledge the dignity of Native Americans and African Americans, we still encounter the problem of discrimination in many different ways. The influx of immigrants from Latin America and other regions has continued this troubling dynamic, and it pushes us to ask the question: How is it that nearly twenty-one centuries after Jesus Christ, we still fail to see the migrant as our neighbor? 

Sadly, the U.S.-Mexico border is not the only international border where migrants suffer indignities. Governments across Latin America are approving policies that directly or indirectly endanger the life of the migrant. For instance, in Honduras, migrants from Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia are encountering tougher and increasingly inhumane immigration policies. In many cases, immigration authorities in Mexico and Guatemala are becoming even more inhumane than those of the United States.\(^2\) Why? What is happening to our humanity? Perhaps the problem lies in our failure to be the migrant’s neighbor and our inability to work towards, as Pope John Paul II noted, “a globalization of solidarity.”\(^3\)
As they witnessed to the power of the risen Lord, the apostles urged the first Christian communities not to forget the poor among them. This message is as relevant today as ever, and it has a special urgency, especially for us in Latin America because in most of our nations it is the poor—the migrant poor—who are supporting our economies. The remittances they send tend to be the most important and the most reliable income sources for our economies, especially in countries like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras.

Still, not everyone realizes the challenges involved in migration, neither in the migrant’s homeland nor in the migrant’s new country. In particular, the greatest difficulties are the suffering migrants experience when they decide to leave their loved ones, when they find their way north through dangerous lands, and when they finally face the daunting task of settling into a new place. Their suffering usually involves a process of letting go, of displacement and loss, and even mourning in various ways.

Migration and the Challenge of Mourning

We usually think of mourning when a loved one dies. But mourning is also experienced in many other situations. For instance, we mourn after a relationship breaks up, after losing a long-term job, or leaving a phase of life behind. In the case of the migrant, there is the deep mourning they feel when leaving their country of birth. Leaving friends and family is among the most painful moments in the life of the migrant. It means the disintegration of their emotional world, as well as the weakening, if not the disappearance, of a support system. Many migrants experience this isolation acutely when they are away from home and fall ill for the first time. For various reasons, sometimes they are unable to build a new basic support system in time of need, although sometimes such struggles also open for them the opportunity of discovering new friends and loved ones.

The migrant also mourns the inability to use his native language on a daily basis. Readjusting to a country where another language is spoken can be difficult and even traumatic since ideas, thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and knowledge are communicated through the medium of a shared language and a shared culture. Leaving one’s culture behind is more than just
leaving a geographical location because culture shapes one’s identity and sense of place in the world. But perhaps for most Latin American immigrants, it is the loss of one’s footing in their homelands that is most painful. The affective relationship with the land is powerful in our culture because through the land our ancestors are made present. To the migrants, the land is the Madre Tierra, the Pacha Mama, or Mother Earth.

According to psychologists, the geographical displacement migrants undergo is not insignificant because of this cultural mourning. The changes in scenery and weather and the movement from a rural to an urban setting take a toll on the psyche of migrants. Cultural coordinates, such as using public transportation, learning how to read basic street signals, and many other challenges, can become complex hurdles when migrants enter a new land. In their home countries, people may orient themselves by sights and sounds, by the colors of neighbors’ homes, or even by plants and trees. The experience of learning street names, metro stations, fixed schedules, bus numbers, and such in the new country only increases the stress, anxiety, and suffering of migrants. Unfortunately, if they are unable to overcome these challenges, they begin to close themselves off to their new surroundings while at the same they romanticize their home culture. Migrants may also experience sorrow for the loss of daily contact with their ethnic groups. It is there where race, culture, language, values, and beliefs take shape and permeate daily life. But if the migrants do not overcome such loss, they may fall prey to a type of ethnic fundamentalism or cultural absolutism.

Many people in receiving countries associate immigrants with people who are poor and uneducated. There are a number of immigrants with a college education or even a professional background, but when they become migrants, they must start their life anew in jobs of lower social status. This entails a certain professional mourning. Whereas some worked previously as lawyers or accountants, they are forced now to work as dishwashers and taxi drivers. As a consequence migrants end up interiorizing a sense of inferiority, yet their situation is greatly influenced by labor market factors and immigration policies.

Beyond the physical and professional challenges, migrants also suffer from various health problems including depression or even migraines and ulcers. All this helps us understand why the migrants mourn the loss of their
own health. From the moment they leave their home countries, migrants become exposed to innumerable risks from malnutrition to exposure to infectious diseases. These risks rob migrants of their opportunity to achieve the full use of their God-given gifts along with their potential to serve the community at large according to their possibilities.

So is it hard to migrate? It is clear at this point that migrating is a difficult experience undertaken by strong people. It takes a strong character, body, mind, and soul to undertake this journey, which some have compared to a way of the cross. In addition, we see in the journey of the migrants a troubling contradiction: although they sustain much of the infrastructure of the U.S. economy, they are forced to live as foreigners and outsiders. And although the United States is a country of immigrants, those who come to this country today from foreign lands are still marginalized and excluded. This happens not only in the United States but is a problematic pattern we see in other parts of the world as well. And while globalization has opened borders to capital and commerce, people are being left out. This state of affairs cannot continue. The world must change.

Migration and the Challenge of Hope

Awareness of the migrants’ plight and of the current state of the world is useless if such understanding is not placed at the service of hope. Hope is our strength because we are a people of faith. Therefore we may not become embittered because of so much suffering. We must share the good news through the sweet taste of the gospel. We need to remember basic evangelical attitudes if we are to become the migrant’s neighbor: *accompanyment, encouragement,* and *generosity.* Sharing the journey with the migrants as companions entails remaining in love (Jn 15:1–11). Consider the enduring love of Jesus toward his apostles, to whom he gave the new commandment to love one another: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). The one who truly shares the journey is the person who remains in love. Accompanying the migrant, though, also means doing so through the path of suffering, of pain, of depression, and of carrying their crosses with them. And so the road that leads to spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood is precisely that of sharing in their suffering.
In addition, there is no charity in justice without tears flowing from the eyes and the heart. Encouraging the migrants along the way—to animate them, to put life back into them—is also an important attitude we must learn from Jesus. Time and again throughout the Gospels our Lord animates, gives life and strength to those who in their suffering approach him. The Lord’s concern for Peter and the apostles comes across even though he knew Peter and Judas would respectively deny and betray him. He tells Peter: “I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:32). As for generosity, we must not forget that our Lord identifies himself with the least among us: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me…. Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:35–40). We must share our resources accordingly.

Those who accompany, encourage, and share generously with migrants must remember hope. We must hope against hope. We are called to do so especially within a hopeless humanity that is more and more paralyzed by fear. There is a fear, not without reason, that terrorists are everywhere. But fear is useless, and instead we must look for love far and wide. In this climate of fear, hope is difficult because it is not seen. Hope is not evident because it is only found when one looks for it. Hope is as fragile, small, and gentle as the little child that was born in Bethlehem. Therefore we must take care not to lose hope because, although it is as vulnerable as the Christmas baby, it is also as strong as the Easter resurrection. And our people, especially migrants, know this. They celebrate hope in our liturgy with joy even amidst the most painful suffering. Migrants know this, and we must learn from them.

We have unfinished business, however. Many of the migrants who come to the United States are also migrating out of the Catholic Church and joining other churches. Why? Perhaps it is because we have abandoned them. Perhaps it is because they have not found a welcoming church, a friendly church. Perhaps they just do not know where the church is. This is a great challenge for the church in Latin America and the United States. Perhaps it is because we are not missionary enough with our own people when they leave for the United States. We are not being shepherds in a way we are called to be, and we carry that burden in our conscience.
During the Santo Domingo Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1992, a proposal was made for the dioceses of Latin America to pay the expenses of priests and religious and other pastoral animators to carry on the mission of the church. When immigrants in the last two centuries came from Europe, they frequently brought their own chaplains that helped them establish faith communities in this country. If the bishops in Latin America and the whole of the church do not take more responsibility to evangelize migrants and respond to their needs, many may simply lose their faith or leave the church altogether.

Finally, I am very concerned about the second and third generation of the Latin American immigrant community. When good schools and health services are inaccessible, when even driver’s licenses are beyond the reach of migrants, the children of migrants have few choices except to look for their options on the streets. If there is no home, no family, no love, where are these children going to grow up? The streets await them. Easy money earned through selling drugs awaits them. And sadly, prison may also await them. The biggest problem is not terrorism but organized drug trafficking. Drug traffickers and drug dealers are the ones supporting arms trafficking, gangs, and the kidnapping industry. If this trend continues, our people will only become increasingly marginalized and will be looked upon as criminals. We cannot ask migrants to stop having children, nor may we prevent them from uniting with their families. Are these children going to be the true victims in the future? We need responsible and creative answers. We need to accompany the migrants even to the point of suffering with them. And yet, we must hope against all hope, even and especially in the face of enormous challenges. This is our calling. We are called to see in our migrant brothers and sisters a common humanity and work together for a common solidarity, that is, a community of love and fellowship reflective of the reign of God.

NOTES

1. For statistics on the deaths of immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border and more information on the U.S. southern border strategy see www.stopgatekeeper.org. This border strategy has also been denounced by the joint document of the Mexican Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the United States Conference of
FOREWORD


4. In Gal 2:10 Paul says that when he went to Jerusalem the apostles James, Cephas (Peter), and John “asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.”

5. For more information on the size and impact of remittances by immigrants from the USA see Kevin O’Neil, “Remittances from the United States in Context,” www.migrationinformation.org, June 1, 2003.


8. This stark contradiction between economic integration promoted by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the U.S. refusal to deal with the immigration issue is repeatedly denounced by Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

Preface

This book is the fruit of a common journey of faith, a common mission, and a friendship that began developing across borders. We (Gioacchino Campese and Daniel Groody) first met at a conference on “Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization,” which took place on January 24–27, 2002, in Tijuana, Mexico, just across the line from California. This conference was organized by the Scalabrinian missionaries in the United States and the Transborder Institute of the University of San Diego, California. It was a first attempt to promote theological reflection on the experience of international migration, with a particular emphasis on undocumented, Mexican immigrants coming to the United States. At the same time it became an opportunity for human rights activists, religious leaders, scholars, and others involved in the issue of migration to establish relationships and to share ideas, experiences, and common concerns. This conference was the beginning of many important relationships that gave birth to many significant projects, including this one.

Following the conference we met again at Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, a shelter for immigrants run by the Scalabrinian missionaries, where Gioacchino had been working for seven years. On the other side of the border, Daniel had been working with immigrants in Coachella, California, while pursuing his doctoral studies. During our conversations we realized that foremost in our hearts and minds was our pastoral interest in the plight of immigrants, who were suffering and dying in alarming numbers at the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, we wanted to do more serious theological reflection that emerged precisely out of this painful context. Not only was there an urgent need for this reflection, but also we felt it was long overdue. In the months and years that followed, others in church and academic circles reiterated the urgency of this issue and the hunger for a more solid conceptual grounding of theology and migration.
Over a breakfast in Casa del Migrante, we wanted to explore other ways to continue this important conversation. On September 19–22, 2004, we organized an international conference on migration and theology at the University of Notre Dame. The interest and participation in this event was much greater than we anticipated, which confirmed our sense that we were on the right track, speaking to an important need and addressing a very relevant issue. After this conference we asked various other scholars to submit articles for this present volume.

As a complement to the scholarly issues in this volume, we recognized that more work had to be done in reshaping the imagination of people in regards to who these immigrants are, where they come from, and what they go through in coming to the United States, mostly to work at jobs that no one else wants. We felt one of the best ways to do this was through a video production. We wanted to portray the human face of these immigrants, the face of Christ that became evident to us (Mt 25:35), and the profound, but often hidden, theological dimension of their perilous journey toward the “promised land.” Frequently we have likened this journey to the way of the cross, and one of the central theological challenges has been deciphering and discerning the dimensions of death and resurrection in this journey. For three years we worked on the production of a DVD called Dying to Live. We interviewed leading scholars in the field, border patrol agents, smugglers, pastoral workers, and immigrants, and they helped shape both the socioeconomic, political, and above all theological contours of this issue. Since its release in the fall of 2005, Dying to Live has been used in various educational settings ranging from parishes to colleges around the world. It has been accepted to various international film festivals, won numerous awards, and has aired on various television stations, including PBS. More information about the film can be found at www.dyingtolive.nd.edu. This film offers an important supplement to this volume precisely because many of the scholars in the film also have essays in this work.

Migration today, perhaps more than in any other era in human history, is a worldwide phenomenon that is integrally related to the dynamics of globalization. This book, in fact, precipitated a more systematic reflection on the relationship not only of theology to immigration but also of theology to globalization. While all the essays are written with these global dimensions in mind, our focus will be on how this phenomenon is experienced
particularly at the U.S.-Mexico border, which is closest to our context, our experience, and our hearts.

At the same time, we also believe that what is happening at this particular border has important universal implications. The border reveals, perhaps more than any other context, the controversial nature of migration, the misunderstandings and ignorance that surround it, and the political interests that criminalize and dehumanize the immigrants themselves. Images and metaphors fanning fears of invasions, borders out of control, criminality, drug smuggling, and—especially since the tragic events of 9/11—threats of national security abound in virtually any debate about immigration in the United States. Much of the mass media, instead of helping to sort out this issue, unfortunately adds to and promotes this negative anti-immigrant rhetoric. During these debates many so-called experts and pundits reveal a simplistic and politically charged understanding of immigration, which often leads them to the conclusion that it is only by getting tougher at the border and criminalizing all “illegal aliens” that the “problem” will be solved. These people, willingly or unwillingly, tend to forget and ignore that immigration is a complex issue that has no easy solutions because it has become an integral part of the globalization process, which demands not only movements of ideas and products but also of people. Our reflection then is not only about the border where the United States meets Mexico but about the border between national security and human insecurity, sovereign rights and human rights, citizenship and discipleship. We believe a serious reflection on the theological dimensions of immigration helps us go beyond inflammatory debates and consider in a deeper way what it means to be human before God and what it means to live together as a human community.

A serious intellectual debate on immigration requires listening to all sides of the conversation in order to understand the concerns that all constituencies bring to the table. Many of the issues that surface are legitimate and need to be considered, no matter how extreme, but too often the concerns of the central protagonists—namely, the immigrants and their families—go completely unheard, unrecognized, and unheeded. Whenever the voices of the immigrants are left out of the debate, our capacity to see the fundamental human dignity of these people is diminished, which paves the way to various kinds of injustices. As people created in the image
and likeness of God, this same dignity is the foundation from which to build a Christian interpretation of the immigrant reality.

In recent decades, U.S. Hispanic theologians, especially the pioneering work of Virgilio Elizondo, Orlando Espín, Roberto Goizueta, and others, have made important contributions to our contextualized understanding of Latinos in the United States. More recently, various Latina theologians, such as María Pilar Aquino, Jeanette Rodríguez, Daisy Machado, Carmen Nanko, Michelle Gonzalez, Nancy Piñeda and others, have looked at the unique experience of women and their struggles for dignity, empowerment, and human liberation. A Christian theological interpretation of the border reality, however, has been one of the most neglected areas of immigration research. While recently social scientists have been rediscovering the importance of religion in the journey of immigrants in the United States, theologians have not yet fully explored the theological implications of the reality of migration. It is precisely the theological dimension of the phenomenon of migration—beginning with the humanity of the immigrant—that we consider the foremost contribution of this volume.

Building on the methodology of other praxis-based theologies, one of our central goals is to propose a theology of immigration based on the experience of immigrants and the reality of immigration. The essays contained in this volume are divided into four parts. The first three parts examine the reality of immigration, the theological tradition and political context that affect our interpretation of that reality, and the pastoral practice that in turn shapes our theological reflection. The final part does not offer a definitive theology of immigration but offers some initial ways through which such a theology can begin to be developed and articulated.

In the first part the authors provide the foundations of a theology of migration. The first article by Jacqueline Hagan is a description of religion, and particularly popular religion, as an essential resource in the difficult journey of undocumented migrants. Her social-scientific perspective adds to our understanding of popular religion as an important locus theologicus in the context of migration and is an invitation to theologians to join in fruitful dialogue with social scientists on the topic of the faith of immigrants. Donald Senior offers in his essay some important biblical perspectives on the subject of migration and summarizes the main motifs that the New Testament texts attach to the experience of social dislocation. Peter C. Phan deals with
the era immediately following the New Testament communities and writings, also known as the patristic era, and provides historical and theological overviews of the importance of the theme of migration during this influential period of church and world history. Drawing on personal experience, as well as the experience of mystics, poets, and other writers throughout the ancient tradition and contemporary times, Alex Nava discusses the metaphor of the desert, and examines the challenge of finding the mystery of the divine presence amidst the death of many at the border. Gustavo Gutiérrez approaches the issue from a more systematic perspective, and particularly from the optic of the option for the poor, one of the essential theological themes of contemporary Christian theology.

The second part deals with the issue of mission and ministry to the migrants both in theoretical and practical terms. Stephen Bevans lays out the missiological and ecclesiological principles of ministry to the immigrants and of the immigrants, and in this way reminds the church that these people are not just a preferential target of our ministry but that they are also the protagonists of the Missio Dei. Robert Schreiter underlines the significance of the ministry of reconciliation in the context of migration, and describes the steps that must be taken to address the challenges that the migrants have to confront in the different stages of the migration process. Giovanni Graziano Tassello traces the trajectory of the Scalabrinian tradition of ministry among migrants, which is one of the most extensive outreaches to immigrants around the world, and looks at how this tradition can help us face the challenges ahead. The last two essays of this section narrate and reflect on two particular experiences of direct ministry to the migrants in two different geographical contexts in the United States. Patrick Murphy reflects on his ministerial experience among the growing population of Hispanic immigrants in Kansas City, Kansas, and enumerates the challenges that such a ministry poses to the Catholic Church in the United States. Robin Hoover gives an account of an ecumenical and civic initiative, the organization Humane Borders, which aids undocumented immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, and whose goals include not only saving the lives of these human beings but also influencing the political process that leads to the formulation of U.S. immigration laws.

The third part treats the issues of global ethics, human rights, and gender. Here the authors formulate some of the ethical and philosophical principles
that should guide the policy and politics of migration. In a context in which immigration is seen from a moral and legal perspective, which tends to emphasize solely the fact that immigrants are breaking the “law of the land,” these essays bring challenging and refreshing insights to the table. Graziano Battistella shows the advantages and limitations of a human rights approach to migration, which leads him to a meaningful discussion of the ethical bases of migration policies. The ethics of inclusion proposed by the social teachings of the Catholic Church provide a solid foundation for migration policies and are a powerful reminder of more fundamental human and Christian values. Donald Kerwin indicates how the debate about immigration policies unfolds in the United States. He affirms that the actual immigration legislation does not reflect the natural rights of immigrants, and shows how the Catholic tradition helps clarify what these rights are and how they are to be promoted in a post-9/11 United States. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt talks about the dynamics of intercultural interaction, which is a constitutive part of the collective transformation of a society. The last paper of this part deals with the issue of gender, which has been until very recently one of the most neglected dimensions in the study of migration. In a revealing essay Olivia Ruiz Marrujo explains the numerous risks associated with the journey of immigrant women, underlining perhaps one of the most painful and less talked about aspect of their immigration experience, that is, sexual violence.³

The fourth and last part of this volume offers three different theological interpretations of the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border seen from the optic of migration. Jorge E. Castillo Guerra proposes an intercultural methodology for theologizing about the reality of migration. Gioacchino Campese employs the metaphor of the crucified people, coined by Ignacio Ellacuría and later developed by Jon Sobrino, to explain how especially undocumented immigrants live and experience the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border. In his essay he underlines both the prophetic and grace-filled dimensions of this “crucified” reality. Daniel Groody relates the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border to the theology of the Eucharist, and shows how the experience and witness of immigrants can give us a new way of understanding God’s presence through the encounter with Christ in the migrant and the encounter with Christ in this sacrament. In this encounter we can begin to see Christ in the eyes of the immigrant and begin to see the immigrant with the eyes of Christ.
This volume would not have been possible without the commitment, collaboration, and friendship of many people. First of all we thank our religious communities, the Congregation of Holy Cross and the Missionaries of St. Charles (Scalabrinians), for their unwavering support of this project. Secondly, our gratitude and recognition goes to the people who organized the “Migration and Theology” conference and made it possible with their dedication and hard work: John Cavadini, Gilbert Cardenas, Allert Brown-Gort, Terry Garza, Claudia Ramirez, Virgilio Elizondo, Anthony Suarez, Joseph Fugolo, Claudio Holzer, Edward Malloy, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. Victor Carmona also was of great assistance in transcribing and translating much of the material that contributed to the essays of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Oscar Cardinal Rodríguez. Special thanks also to Raquel Ferrer, Larry Cunningham, Mark Roche, Gretchen Reydams-Schils, Julia Braungart-Rieker, Carolyn Woo, Tim Matovina, Bill Seetch, Maribel Rodriguez, Zoe Samora, Caroline Domingo, Cheryl Kelly, Doug Franson, Nathan Hatch, Brett Keck, and Marisa Marquez. Mary J. Miller in particular has provided detailed and careful editorial feedback, frequently going above and beyond the call of duty, which has been invaluable in the preparation of this volume. Our gratitude goes also to the following institutions and departments of the University of Notre Dame: the Office of the President, the Department of Theology, the Institute for Latino Studies, the Graduate School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights, the Center for Social Concerns, the College of Arts and Letters, the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, the Mendoza College of Business, the Henkels Lecture Series, and the Center for Continuing Education. We are also thankful to the two Scalabrinian North American Provinces, St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Borromeo, the Scalabrini International Migration Institute, and the Center for Migration Studies. Finally we acknowledge the support of the Catholic Relief Services, the Secretariat for the Church in Latin America, and Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Through the efforts of this book, we hope to create a space where the voice of the powerless can be heard so that we can work together for a more just, peaceful, and humane world that is reflective of the reign of God. Above all, we dedicate this book to those who have died in the deserts of the American Southwest, particularly the nameless multitudes who have perished without a trace, yet whose lives are known to God alone.
NOTES

1. Most of the papers presented at that conference have been published in Gioacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella, eds., *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003).

2. One of the outcomes of this period of ministry and research has been the publication of Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).


