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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Latin American Immigrants: A Cry for Liberation

By Julio César De León

Abstract: The United States, due to its economic stability and abundant opportunities (among other reasons), has attracted many immigrants from across the globe, but particularly those from Latin America. The reality is that while many immigrate under more favorable circumstances, the majority of Latinos/as (usually the ones most in need) embark on a dangerous journey, overcoming the difficulties they encounter on the way. Although there is great hope in having arrived to the U.S., for those who make it to the other side of the frontier, their suffering often continues as their social status becomes that of undocumented immigrants. Through the lens of liberation theology, which demands praxis and favors God's preferential option for the poor, this paper argues that it is God's will for the poor to be liberated, for humanity to live in peaceful harmony, and for Christians to love one another despite our differences. It is important not only to theologize on the parallelisms of people's suffering and that of Christ, it is also essential to take concrete action in alleviating the suffering of immigrants in the United States.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Preferential Option for the Poor, Immigration, United States

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Immigration has been present in human history for centuries. In most cases, immigration occurs as a result of people attempting to escape the reality in which they live. An immigrant's country of origin is usually characterized as a place where the forces of poverty, violence, and social injustice prevail. The scarcity of employment, resources, and security coupled with inhumane treatment by sociopolitical structures inflict great suffering on people; hence, their urgency to depart in search for a better, more dignified life in foreign lands. When the aforementioned forces of a dysfunctional society hunt people down, the consequence is very clear: suffering that leads to death.

The United States, due to its economic stability and abundant opportunities (among other reasons), has attracted many immigrants from across the globe, but particularly those from Latin America. The reality is that while many immigrate under more favorable circumstances, the majority of Latinos/as (usually the ones most in need) embark on a dangerous journey, overcoming the difficulties they encounter on the way. Although there is great hope in having arrived to the U.S., for those who make it to the other side of the frontier, their suffering often continues as their social status becomes that of undocumented immigrants. This situation greatly resonates with my personal immigrant identity being born and raised in El Salvador, but it also resonates with my communities of accountability who are the U.S. Hispanics in the Catholic Church, many of them with immigrant backgrounds. Through the lens of liberation theology, which demands praxis and favors God's preferential option for the poor, this paper will attempt to answer the following question: How can the life of a Latin American immigrant with his/her experiences before, during and post-immigration be a source for theological reflection in light of their suffering? To set a firm foundation before diving into theological inquiries, let us define what contextual theology is and why it matters for this research.

Contextual Theology: A Theological Imperative

Doing theology in a contextual manner reveals and shapes our understanding of who God is in the eyes of people from different parts of the world. It seeks to attend to the cultural, social, and political movements and realities people are conditioned by. Latin America, for instance, has its unique way of experiencing the world, which inevitably influences people's experience of religion. Latinos/as' understanding of faith and ways of expressing it are greatly influenced by the cultural and historical context that surrounds them. To engage in a theology that looks at the reality of the world, from a Latin American perspective, is a theology that responds to relevant and current events that unfold among specific communities; therefore, it is contextual.

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Contextual theology is considered a theological imperative. Looking at the implications defining the experience of Latin American immigrants as they journey to the U.S., one realizes that applying a contextual theology is of utmost importance. As Stephan Bevans mentions, “the contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context – is really a theological imperative.”¹ An unavoidable reality, people’s understanding of the world is influenced by the conditions in which they live; theologians are not immune to this reality. The way we do theology matters. Assuming that theology is a *theologia perennis* (a notion that theology is completely objective and never changing) is no longer relevant, especially when engaging in matters pertaining to liberation theology. As Bevans says:

If one works out of a classicist conception of culture, there can be only one theology – one that is valid for all times, all places, all cultures. However, if one works out of an empirical notion of culture, not only can there be a theology for every culture and period of history, there *must* be. Theology... is what mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix. Theology, in other words, is the way religion makes sense within a particular culture.²

Taking a contextual theology approach to the reality of Latin American immigrants brings to light themes that, when interpreted adequately, can make a connection to Jesus and his life. Christianity holds Christ’s life and ministry to be salvific, revelatory (God’s reign), and an act of gratuitous love by way of his incarnation. However, it cannot go unnoticed that Jesus’ incarnation was also a contextual one. Reflecting on the humanity of Jesus and the historical implications surrounding the time, place, and circumstances he was born into, reveal similarities with the lives and experiences of Latin American immigrants. Considering a contextual approach to Jesus as he relates to immigrants seeks not to ignore all the objective theology, Scripture, and traditions the Church has inherited throughout history. Instead, its purpose is to draw connections between the historical Jesus (the traditional) and the current ways in which Christ’s passion takes on a contemporary human form in the flesh of Latin American immigrants (the new). In Bevans’ words, “A contextual approach to theology is a departure from the notion of traditional theology, but at the same time it is very much in continuity with it. To understand theology as contextual is

¹ Steven B. Bevans, “Contextual Theology as a Theological Imperative,” *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised and expanded edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002): 1.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

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to assert something both new and traditional.”³ In conversation with the past, contextual theology seeks to address present, relevant matters that speak to the reality of a community.

In speaking about contextual ways of doing theology, it is also necessary to acknowledge the difference between a culture of content and a culture of context. In his book, *An Immigration of Theology*, Fr. Simon C. Kim examines the theological endeavors of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez by comparing and contrasting their perspectives. One important insight, that both Elizondo and Gutiérrez contributed to, is the distinction of content and context. Fr. Kim’s insert of John Ford’s quote explains this differentiation in a practical way:

American culture tends to be a culture of *content*: a culture that values logic and deduction, a culture which emphasizes the objective and the quantitative. For example, when Americans want to make a point, defend a decision, or especially when they want to win an argument, they usually present their views in a straight-forward way: “these are my reasons for doing this”; “my decision is based on the following facts”; “just look at the data.” In contrast, the Hispanic/Latino culture is one of *context*: a culture that values induction and the symbolic, a culture which emphasizes the personal and the qualitative. For example, when Hispanics/Latinos want to make a point they often tell a story.⁴

The theological method of Elizondo and Gutiérrez seeks to understand context in order to deliver content in the most adequate way. It is because of this that the experiences of immigrants coming from Latin American countries can be more appropriately examined through the lens of liberation theology, which begins with *la realidad*. The reality of life is one of the fundamental aspects of liberation theology. This contextual approach resonates strongly among Latinos/as. “In sum, a culture of content stresses the objective, the legal, and the political while a culture of context stresses the subject, the familial, and the communal.”⁵ Latin American immigrants belong to a culture and context where lived experiences and the subjective are valued. It is a gift that, among other things, allows us to connect more easily with others at a human level, where mutual support, solidarity and the communal take priority over individualism.

Preferential Option for the Poor

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Simon C. Kim, *An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context as the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 164.

⁵ Ibid., 167.

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The Latin American Bishops' Conferences in Medellín, Colombia, and Puebla, Mexico, in 1968 and 1979 respectively, acknowledged the presence of the poor in our world and the biblical meaning of poverty. At the conference, it was argued that the preferential option for the poor, a manifestation of God's gratuity, is revealed to us in Scripture. God incarnate in the person of Jesus took sides with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed of his time. It is important to note that God's preference for the poor is not arbitrary; it is not a claim of exclusive love for the poor disregarding the rest of humanity. God favors the poor because they are victims of injustice at the hands of dominant forces of evil. The poor are vulnerable and often voiceless while they suffer under the oppression of the powerful. This inflicts human damage, and it is a sin that leads to the premature death of many; it is not what God wills for humanity. Roberto Goizueta explains,

God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God's agapeic love.⁶

God's will is for the poor to be liberated from the forces of oppression. God is present among the poor; therefore, "to turn a deaf ear to the cries of the poor is implicitly to identify God's voice with that of the status quo and, hence, its established power structures."⁷ By the same token, presupposing that God has no preference for the weak and vulnerable over the oppressor and high-powered is to affirm God consents to injustice. Similarly, in order for us to avoid becoming indirect partakers of oppressing forces, we must stand on the side of the poor. Neutrality is unacceptable; one either confronts and denounces the forces of oppression or allows them to continue dominating by our negligence. But who are the poor of contemporary society?

Jesus certainly encountered marginalized and suffering groups during his life and ministry. He walked among them, ate with them, and announced God's reign to them revealing mercy, hope, and predilection. In modern times, God continues to walk among the poor. They are present in our midst and can be found in the cry of Latin American immigrants. We must

⁶ Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), Loc 4203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc 4226.

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recognize that they are with us. They are part of society and they are people deserving of living a dignified life free of maltreatment and injustice. Their presence and suffering affect all of us. Goizueta explains that, “The intentional option for the poor forces us to recognize the reality that the poor are *already* with us, already present in our lives. As Martin Luther King insisted, as long as there is one black person who is in chains, we are all in chains... The very refusal to act impacts the lives of the poor. We can never truly escape the poor.”⁸

As members of society, our lives are interrelated with one another. The way we treat those who live under oppression, the vocabulary we utilize when speaking about them, the example children see from their parents when interacting with others of lower socioeconomic status, it all contributes to either a continuous neglect of this problem or it leads us to taking proactive steps in promoting the belief that every human being, especially the most vulnerable, hold a special value in the eyes of humanity. As people of faith, we are called to fight the forces of evil that seek to maintain the poor oppressed, so as to ensure that human dignity prevails.

Jesus and the Latin American Immigrant

The historical Jesus, and the context in which he lived share some similarities with that of Latin American immigrants living in the United States. Virgilio Elizondo’s *mestizaje*, as in reference to Jesus’ ethnic identity, can inform our understanding of the historical Jesus and his resemblance with the Latin American immigrants of today. In *The Gospel Matrix*, part two of his book *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo examines the life of Jesus during his public ministry and the socio-cultural reality he grew up in. According to Elizondo, geographical origin seemed to be an element for stereotype. In the time of Jesus, Galilee had become known as the land of *Cabul*, which meant “like nothing” or “very displeasing.”⁹ To be a Galilean Jew, to a certain extent, was to be viewed as ignorant, insignificant, and despised. Because of the rejection from the Jews of Jerusalem toward the culturally diverse people of Galilee, one could say that Jesus became one among the rejected people of society. Furthermore, Elizondo offers the insight that the stereotypical image of the Galilean to the Greco-Romans is similar to today’s image of the Mexican American to the Anglo community of the U.S., meaning that one community is subjected to discrimination and rejection by the other.¹⁰

Further parallels can be drawn based on Jesus’ childhood. According to Scripture, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt in order to escape the persecution of Herod. Similarly to Latin American

⁸ Ibid., Loc 4250.

⁹ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

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immigrants, they journeyed to a distant land in order to protect Jesus from the imminent danger of death at the hands of the powerful. After being warned by an angel, Joseph and Mary made the decision to safeguard the life of their son at the expense of becoming immigrants, foreigners, and strangers in the land of Egypt. They resided there for a number of years until Jesus' life was no longer at risk, then departed to the region of Galilee. Jesus lived in his own flesh the Exodus that Israel once experienced as he, too, was called out of Egypt. Thus, how can Latin American immigrants be immune to the unfair treatment and rejection that also existed in Jesus' time given geographical and racial implications? In likeness to the story of Jesus' immigrant family, it is the utopian desire of a Latin American immigrant to be called out of Egypt. Immigrants seek to protect their families and provide for them more dignified living conditions. They dream of a society where the threats of premature death, suffering, and human injustice are not a primary concern for its citizens.

Although Scripture leaps from Jesus' early years to the time he was baptized by John the Baptist, based on the historical claims made by Elizondo, one can presuppose that Jesus was not exempt from stereotypical perceptions because of his Galilean-Jew identity, a *mestizo*. A Christology with an emphasis on Jesus' *mestizaje* reveals a common factor between immigrants and the historical Jesus: Jesus, too, was a *mestizo*. To give an explicit definition of the concept of *mestizo*, Roberto Goizueta, a prominent Latino(a) theologian, uses the phrase "in between," which means just that: living between two identities. What's problematic about this identity is that those who live "in between" find no ultimate connection with one world or the other. In the case of Latin American immigrants, this disconnection occurs between their country of origin and the United States. Having left one's native country, an immigrant abruptly ends a relationship with the land, authentic culture, people, and traditions that he or she was born into. Even when they do not die physically, the immigrants "undergo a death culturally, psychologically, socially and emotionally... The Mexican immigrant (as well as immigrants from other nationalities) experiences an agonizing movement from belonging to nonbelonging, from relational connectedness to family separation, from being to nonbeing, from life to death."¹¹

For most Latin American immigrants, especially first-generation immigrants, adapting to a new country presents several hardships. Despite their efforts assimilating into a new culture, set of values, traditions and language, it is still very challenging for immigrants to do so. Many continue to carry not only the pain of leaving their families behind, but the wounds left by their

¹¹ Daniel G. Groody, "Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant: A Spiritual Geography of a Crucified People," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 311.



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dreadful journey through deserts, rivers, and mountains when coming to the U.S. Even those who seem to have assimilated the culture well, including the language, may still be perceived as foreigners not fully belonging to this country. Goizueta explains that, “It is our very identity as mestizos/as exiles, a people living in between, that, indeed, makes us ultimately unacceptable to the dominant U.S. culture. The mestizo/a and exile is a person who, by definition, inhabits the in-between world of “both/and.”¹² The question is, can those immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for a significant number of years ultimately be recognized by Americans as people of their own? What about their native countries? Are immigrants, who have lived in the U.S. for decades, still accepted and perceived as belonging to the countries they came from? This is the reality many immigrants face. The living “in between” is a phenomenon that Jesus experienced by being a mestizo Jew living in the land of Galilee, and it is a reality that many immigrants carry on today, such is the case of my own.

Sharing the Experience

Having immigrated to the United States in 2006, I’ve experienced several stages in the process of adaptation to a new country. Although the initial obstacles were many, I was able to overcome them. I strongly believe that walking this journey of assimilation would have not been possible without God’s love and grace, which sheltered me and strengthened me all throughout. Like the psalmist, I was certain that “my help came from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.”¹³ Even though I was just a teenager at the time, I found strength in prayer, spirituality and in the support of the Hispanic church community of the United States. Providentially, my journey with Christ had begun at a much earlier age where God laid the foundation and nourished my spirit to be able to withstand the demands an immigrant faces in a foreign country. Prior to living in the U.S., I lived with my parents who raised me in the Catholic faith. I experienced the religiosity of Latin America firsthand. A love for the depiction of the suffering Christ, which is very prevalent in El Salvador, shaped my understanding of faith and God as one who suffers with and accompanies his people. Without realizing it, and in the midst of solitude, discrimination, and emotional instability, I developed a spirituality of hope and consolation in Christ who walked with me as a partaker in my own suffering. Being a Salvadorian American immigrant who continues to live “in between,” I identify with the latent reality of immigrants

¹² Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 33.

¹³ Psalm 121:2.

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today who continue to cross the border and, in their journey, find refuge and great consolation in Christ who spiritually accompanies them all throughout.

An Immigrant's Journey:
spirituality of sacrifice, spirituality of the desert and spirituality of the cross.

The journey of Latin American immigrants to the United States is characterized by a particular spirituality subdivided in the categories of spirituality of sacrifice, spirituality of the desert and spirituality of the cross. Daniel G. Groody speaks of these three spiritualities. He speaks particularly from the experience of the Mexican immigrants whose spirituality is found within the immigrant journey itself and the land they travel on. Immigrants' spirituality of sacrifice is palpable in their commitment to withstand all kinds of suffering in order to provide for their families.

In Groody's immersed theological work, a Mexican immigrant shares to him, "Nobody comes to the States for sightseeing or to get rich. My family is very poor, and they depend on me. We have nothing to eat, really just beans and tortillas, and I am anxious to respond to their needs."¹⁴ Walking hundreds of miles on foot in a sometimes very unforgiving terrain, while also carrying as much food and water provisions as they can, Latin American immigrants also carry with them dreams of liberation for themselves and their families. Their suffering, however, seems to be accompanied by a strong devotion to God. Although not all immigrants may be faithful devoted members of the Church in their countries of origin, most of them seem to coincide in recurring to the divine for protection and refuge upon migrating, "When we started the journey" said Mario, "the first thing we did was make the sign of the cross. We asked for protection from the snakes and from other dangers."¹⁵ Many immigrants find great strength and consolation in knowing that Jesus himself was rejected, tortured, misunderstood, and ridiculed. They also find comfort in the fact that, historically, Mary and Joseph also fled their native land to protect Jesus. From the perspective of the suffering Christ, immigrants find reassurance in the person of Jesus.¹⁶

Part of the route many immigrants take on their way to the U.S. includes crossing extended deserted areas on foot, which Groody claims gives rise to a spirituality of the desert. The extreme living conditions that immigrants endure as they journey through the desert are inhumane and often lead to death. The high temperatures of the weather, hunger, thirst, and a

¹⁴ Groody, "Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant," 303.

¹⁵ Ibid., 303.

¹⁶ Ibid., 306.

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feeling of exhaustion eventually result in becoming disoriented and even experiencing moments of agony.

He [Manuel] said, 'I was scared. I got lost and then sick, and I wondered if I would make it out alive.' In the midst of his weakness and vulnerability he also became more aware of the presence of God. When I asked him what he had learned in the desert, he said, "I simply prayed. After my friends left me and I was out there all alone, I learned that all I have is God, and he is the one friend who will never leave me."¹⁷

We could say that the near-death experiences in the desert have an unexpected effect on immigrants as those moments mediate an encounter with God through suffering and anguish. They remember Jesus who also spent time in the desert and was tempted. According to Groody, immigrants feel that, in a way, they were also being tempted to not trust in God. However, they felt God calling them to be persistent while finding strength in the memories of their families left behind. "I did not want to let myself be conquered by death least of all. At times I wanted to just stay there in the desert and die, but then I would think about my wife and my family who needed me... this is what gave me strength."¹⁸

A spirituality of the cross aids immigrants in enduring the dangers that threaten their lives and leads them to an understanding of life being a gift from God and not something they possess by their own merits. Witnessing the death of friends on the desert journey, for instance, makes them aware of how fragile life is and that all they have comes from the benevolent hand of God. Being faced with starvation, immigrants learn to be grateful for food; enduring cold nights and hot afternoons under the overwhelming heat of the sun, they learn to be grateful for shelter and the warmth of family, a God given gift. Spirituality of the cross gives rise to an understanding of God's greatness and acknowledgement that he is in control. "I have come to see that one of the greatest miracles is simply that I am alive, that I exist at all" said Ricardo, an immigrant, "Through this whole process [of migrating], I've come to see just how beautiful life is."¹⁹

Groody's research not only focused on the experience of the immigrants journeying, but he also interacted with border patrol and their surveillance facilities.

¹⁷ Ibid., 305.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 307.



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When looking at a wide panorama of television screens, the agents zoomed in on one region and said, ‘Yesterday in this spot we found three immigrants who died after crossing the border.’ When I asked the name of the area, an agent replied, ‘It’s called Crucifixion Thorn. It’s a nature preserve that has a rare, spiny plant, like the one used to crown Jesus’ head.’ He was simply recounting a basic geographical fact, without any apparent awareness of the theological ramifications of this statement.”²⁰

The profound theological connection between the immigrant experience in the desert and this border area called Crucifixion Thorn cannot be overlooked. The strong symbology of the event narrated above, suggests that those three immigrants who died there united their suffering with that of Christ. By the presence of this symbol of the crucifixion, Christ was beside those immigrants during their death as the physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion of this journey leading to a Golgotha, crucified them. Therefore, unless social structures of sin, made manifest by the marginalization of peoples, come to an end, Jesus Christ’s suffering and crucifixion will continue to be present and palpable in the lives of Latin American immigrants of today.

The Crucified People

Latin American immigrants are the “crucified people” of contemporary society. The contextual theology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría raises the claim that immigrants are personifications of the crucified Christ. “Ignacio Ellacuría understands the crucified people as ‘that vast portion of humankind, which is actually and literally crucified by natural...historical and personal oppressions.’”²¹ Furthermore, Ignacio Ellacuría frames his theology as a theology of sign. This theology of sign is a departure from Karl Rahner’s theology of symbol; it is an effort to contextualize Rahner’s theology through Latin American lens. Generally speaking, Rahner’s theology of symbol claims that all beings express themselves through their symbolic nature. Ellacuría intentionally wants his theology to coincide with the Second Vatican Council mandate to read the signs of the times and give them interpretation in light of the Gospel.²² Moreover, a theology of sign can be applied to a Latin American context as it was one of the intentions of Ellacuría. Robert Lassalle asserts that, “In 1978 Ellacuría further historicized this theology of

²⁰ Ibid., 306.

²¹ Robert Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 309.

²² Ibid., 348.

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sign for a Latin American context with the startling claim that the principal sign of the times by whose light others should be discerned and interpreted is the historically crucified people.”²³ The suffering immigrants “embody the consequences of sin and the rejection of God’s self-offer in human history.”²⁴ Groody believes that crucifixion, used as a metaphor, can be understood beyond Christ’s own sacrifice and reinterpreted in the suffering and unjust treatment of people in all generations.

Solidarity and Accompaniment

The crucified people are those who suffer social injustice, inequality, poverty, rejection, and violence. Jon Sobrino argues, “the crucified peoples are those who fill up in their flesh what is lacking in Christ’s passion...They are the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history.”²⁵ One of the contemporary voices denouncing social sin in defense of *el pueblo* is that of St. Oscar Romero, a saint and martyr who was silenced after his assassination during the civil war of El Salvador in 1980. Prior to being appointed as Archbishop of San Salvador, the country’s capital, he served as Bishop of Santiago de María, a very poor community. Serving in a poor community like Santiago de María mediated a revelation of God and truth by way of being among the poor.

Romero began to see God from the perspective of the poor and understood what it means to be a crucified with Christ; his devotion to the crucified Jesus took a human form. With the rising of the civil war in El Salvador, Romero felt that the Church could not be indifferent to the suffering of *el pueblo*. Referring to the terrorized survivors of the 1977 Aguilares massacre, Archbishop Romero said, “You are the image of the pierced savior,” a clear statement unveiling his understanding of *el pueblo* sharing in the suffering of Christ.²⁶ He wrote to the president and bishops expressing his concern on violence and the killing of the *campesinos*. His words and actions were that of a mediator for peace. Despite opposition he always stood on the side of justice denouncing the sinful acts occurring in El Salvador.

Upon the death of Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest and friend of Romero, he considered the possibility of a violent death, and feared. Nonetheless, he continued to pursue the truth and to stand in solidarity with the suffering people. The relationship and circumstances that Rutilio Grande and Romero experienced are parallel to the relationship and circumstances of Jesus Christ and St. John the Baptist. Being the first martyr of the Church, St. John the Baptist

²³ Ibid., 354.

²⁴ Groody, “Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant,” 309.

²⁵ Ibid., 310.

²⁶ Ibid.



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proclaimed God's truth and faith, and was killed. Jesus, who was also carrying a ministerial life in favor of the truth and love for others, may have experienced a feeling of fear when learning about John's death; nonetheless, just as St. Oscar Romero, Jesus continued his ministerial work being faithful to God the Father and the call to his vocation. Jesus' ministry was also in favor of those considered the "crucified" of his time. Similarly, Romero embraced the role of a pastor, so much as to give his life for the sheep. St. Oscar Romero was a man of faith that continues to accompany the crucified people of El Salvador today through the fruits of his labor and acts of solidarity.

The Salvadorian history of oppression and marginalized society is only one of many scenarios that have occurred and continue occurring in other Latin American countries. Unfortunately, this is the reality that many Latin American immigrants are desperate to escape from. They long to be liberated. Many immigrants are also "crucified", not only by the lives they lived in their countries of origin, but once having arrived in this country continue to be crucified by the physical demands of their jobs. For instance, let us briefly examine Cesar Chavez's words:

Every time I see lettuce, that's the first thing I think of, some human being had to thin it. And it's just like being nailed to a cross...[Like working with sugar beets,] that was work for an animal, not a man. Stooping and digging all day, and the beets are heavy – oh, that's brutal work. And then go home to some little place, with all those kids, and hot and dirty – that is how a man is crucified.²⁷

Latin American immigrants are often exploited by their employers. Some perceive immigrants as outstandingly hard-working individuals, and that is true, but this perception often causes employers to take advantage of their unconditional willingness to labor. Nevertheless, motivated by a strong desire to provide financial support to their families, immigrants are able to endure the physical demands their jobs may entail. Paradoxically, there is also the stereotype that immigrants are lazy and benefit from opportunities that are otherwise reserved for U.S. citizens. This dichotomy between an immigrant's genuine intentions for honest work and the distorted notion of them taking away American jobs and resources has its roots in capitalism, and it is particularly problematic from a Christian point of view. Scripture, in the Old and New Testament, provides a clear message on how one must act on behalf of the stranger.

²⁷ Ibid., 312.

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When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God. Do not act dishonestly in using measures of length or weight or capacity. You shall have a true scale and true weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.²⁸

“For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.’ Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’”²⁹

Who are the least ones, the strangers and the aliens whom Scripture speaks about? In our contextualized world, they are the immigrants, the broken families, the exploited parents who work overtime, seven days a week because their pay falls under the minimum living wages necessary to meet their basic needs and those of their families. They are those immigrants who kiss their children goodbye as they leave for work every day, and wonder if they will return home as the overwhelming fear and danger of deportation is real. They are those immigrants who work for an extraordinary number of hours every week, yet are exempt from the benefits of full-time employment such as health insurance and the right to a retirement plan. They are those immigrants who live in the shadows and are denied equitable opportunities in a country, which by its Pledge of Allegiance, every person who recites it claims their loyalty and commitment to becoming “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” Where, then, is mercy? Where is love? Where is solidarity? Jesus’ message in the Gospel passage quoted above is very clear: we show our love to God, by choosing to love others. Lastly, let us remember Jesus’ answer to the pharisees when asked what the greatest commandment is, “He (Jesus) said to him (the pharisee), “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You

²⁸ Lev. 19:33-36.

²⁹ Matt. 25:42-45.

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shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”³⁰

Conclusion

Examining immigrants’ understanding of God through the lens of contextual theology is a must. The more we understand their cultural, social, and religious background the better equipped we are to view God through their eyes and hence respond more effectively to their needs.

The preferential option for the poor plays an essential role in our attitude to alleviating the pain and suffering of the least of this world. Jesus in his ministry, revealed to us his preferential option for the poor, and by it also God’s predilection for them, but not in the sense that they are better or more deserving than the rest of humanity, but in the sense that because they are at a constant state of vulnerability and oppression, God, by the grace of his gratuitous love, takes sides with them and in turns opposes the oppressor. Standing in solidarity with immigrants is an act of love and accompaniment for the Christians of this world. It means to respond to the needs and reality of those who suffer and already live among us. It is to take a preferential option for those whom God speaks about in the beatitudes of the Gospel with a tone of predilection. Roberto Goizueta explains, “Human solidarity in the face of suffering is the beginning of liberation. Lived as an end in itself – indeed, as the highest end – that solidarity of and with the poor becomes a seedbed of hope in the face of despair.”³¹

From a historical standpoint and based on his ethnical identity, Jesus also shared similitudes with the lives of immigrants living in the United States. Jesus as a mestizo was also a victim of stereotypes, rejection and persecution. Latin American immigrants find great consolation in knowing this, especially when embarking in the dreadful experience of journeying for miles on foot as an attempt to escape the unbearable reality of extreme poverty, hunger, and inhumane living conditions that exist in their native countries. In the midst of the pain such journey inflicts, immigrants undergo a spiritually transformative process as the near-death experiences they encounter seem to bring them closer to the suffering of Jesus Christ who accompanies them in their struggle for survival.

It is God’s will for the poor to be liberated, for humanity to live in peaceful harmony, and for Christians to love one another despite our differences. Otherwise, the vicious cycle of superiority will continue to cause premature deaths, separation of families, and a system of

³⁰ Matt. 22:37-40.

³¹ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, Loc 4366.



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inequality for immigrant families. God's reign can become a reality in this world when humanity unites by the power of *philia* love, which promotes care, compassion, mercy, fellowship with and for all. Jesus understood this as he said to his disciples, "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."³² As Christ's followers, our call is not only to theologize on the parallelisms of people's suffering and that of Christ. More importantly, we are called to take concrete action in alleviating the suffering of immigrants in the United States. We must become agents of fighting the oppressing forces of evil. As Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría suggest, we are called to "take the crucified people down from the cross."³³

³² John 13:35.

³³ Groody, "Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant," 313.

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