

# Apuntes: Reflexiones teológicas desde el margen hispano

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## Crossing the Border in Search of Christian Hospitality

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Latinos/as are the earliest and recent immigrant non-indigenous humanity in the territory called the United States. While contract historians rarely discuss the Latino presence in positive ways, this community has migrated for hundreds of years from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America to take up residence in all fifty states, including Washington, DC. Today, Latinos are the largest community of color in the United States with a population greater than the seven countries of Central America and a presence judging from election outcomes since the Barack Obama presidency that will not remain marginalized to social, cultural and political life in America. The last several years of resurgent nationalism and xenophobic political authoritarianism saw a racist concern with illegal immigration in the United States, the criminalization of mostly Central American migrants on the Southern Border and a departure from the drive toward comprehensive immigration law reform. Subsequently, the hostile cultural climate and the legal silence on immigrants' rights forced some 12 million undocumented immigrants, the vast majority of them Latinos, into life in the shadows of society.

The ecumenical Protestant tradition appears to prefer the role of quiet spectator in the face of Southern border migrant abuses, and it consistently fails to defend the human and civil rights of Latino/a immigrants. In particular, Central American migrants are regularly violated by public policy practices and cultural rhetoric, while churches charged with declaring God's great border crossing into our world into human flesh say little to nothing at all. Theologically, congregations ought to confess the divine act of a God who weeps for strangers, lives in the shadow of an imperial state with them, is the one Crucified by abusive power and lynched on a tree at the margins of society like strangers routinely criminalized and thrown in jails. Church leadership should declare in the public square that Christ reflected in the face of the stranger points to the good news that

came into the world to comfort the despised, reject exclusionary practices, defend the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, love the excluded, disclose a God of excessive hospitality, and save us from any, and all, models of society based on crucifixion. In light of the persistent flow of Central American migrants, a basic task of the ecumenical Protestant church is to secure justice for the vulnerable and excluded by holding the Oval Office and Congress accountable to an ethic of love in the pursuit of public policy.

In the twenty-first century, migration and problems faced by asylum seekers constitutes one of the most pressing global issues knocking on church doors.<sup>1</sup> Serious theological reflection in this context suggests the importance of not overlooking that the theme of migration is fundamental to the scriptural tradition and recalled in the life of congregations by the story of Abraham, the Exodus narrative, the tales of Moses leading liberated slaves through the wilderness, the crossing into the promised land, Jeremiah's reflection on involuntary migration and in the experience of exile calling God's people to seek the peace of the city, including the Holy Family's flight into Egypt to escape the Herodian persecution. In other words, there is no discussion of God's salvific history without entering into the world of migration, the concern for strangers and the pursuit of new life in the complicated conditions of an anti-immigrant society. Certainly, the ecumenical Protestants who do not notice the pain and suffering caused to Central American migrants

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, when addressing global migration, the issue of human trafficking requires the attention of religious communities. Human trafficking involves controlling and exploiting people after transporting them to a new location, often beyond the borders of their homeland. In this modern form of slavery, traffickers use threats, intimidation, and violence to break their victims' will and resistance. Trafficking in humans has become a global business, reaping huge profits for traffickers and organized crime syndicates, generating massive human rights violations, and causing serious problems for society. Typically, people are trafficked to be used as forced labor, sex workers or for the removal of organs. The exact number of victims of human trafficking is not known though some estimates place it at 29.9 million adults and children a year; To be sure, women and children make up the vast majority of those victimized by the practice. Trafficking dehumanizes people and reduces them to the status of bodies for sale. In other words, Christians must not only care about the psycho-emotional condition of people, made in the image of God, but understand that God created us as embodied creatures. Our social witness concerns are not to exclusively address the mental suffering of individuals, but what happens to people's bodies and to understand the injustices they suffer—sex, labor and organ trafficking.

especially between 2016-2020 on the Southern Border or that looked away from destitute asylum seekers being jailed like criminals failed to love those God placed before them to love and accompany in the pursuit of justice.

There is no shortage of religious leaders from different denominational bodies who look away from the massive problem of population movement and the arrival of newcomers to the United States. Many of them prefer to promote the idea that the future of the church depends on preaching a saccharine gospel, escapist spirituality, and the distorted theological notion that engaging in the mission of the church involves an evangelism that promotes church growth, rather than a concern to bear witness to God's mercy, love, justice, and peace in the bad news of the world. When dealing with the complexities of migration and the contradiction it points to between human rights and national security, legality and illegality, justice and law, belonging and exclusion, churches have an obligation to understand God's option for the least in society requires them to deliver good news in the struggle against racism, xenophobia, economic exploitation and openness to excluded others.

### **Bible Narrative of Migration**

There is much within the Bible that is pertinent to the topic of migration. Biblical stories are rich in chronicling geographical movements of the patriarchs: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel; Joseph, his brothers and their descendants who later became immigrants and slaves in Egypt. We read about the journey of Moses and the children of Israel to the promised land; the experience of the Babylonian exile; Ruth, the foreign and immigrant woman whom Matthew's Gospel lists among Jesus' ancestors (Mt 1:5). It is for these reasons that the God of Israel constantly reminds people to receive, respect and love the immigrants as they love themselves, "for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:33-34). Given the

vulnerability of Central American migrants in the United States, the role of churches advocating for the stranger is a crucial matter of justice and an essential expression of the social witness of faith.

In the New Testament narratives, the gospel of Matthew details how the newborn Jesus takes refuge in Egypt with his family to escape the violent and homicidal persecution of King Herod (Mt 2:13-15). In the same gospel narratives, Jesus identifies with the stranger and assets the attitude of welcoming as one of the main criteria of the "final judgment" (Mt 25:35, 43). The First Letter of Peter also relates how the first Christian communities were composed of strangers and immigrants who had welcomed the good news proclaimed by Jesus' disciples and were striving to live it out in an urban and hostile environment. Migration is a powerful theological metaphor in the Christian faith, which is narrated in the New Testament with the reminder that followers of Christ are strangers in the world. Ecumenical Protestant congregations need to understand their mostly inhospitable response to strangers crossing the border means the needs of vulnerable newcomers to American society is a reflection of the distance between those in need and those who can help. In a society divided by fear, inequality and disdain for strangers, asylum seekers including all global refugees, Christians should seek to understand the theological idea of welcoming strangers/aliens (Mt 25:35) and not oppressing them (Ex 22:20) is more than a matter of legal, political, and economic concern.

Xenophobic discourse influenced a crazed racist to go on a shooting rampage to gun down Latinos/as in a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, yet the event was marginally condemned by churches. The relative silence was a sign of the blasphemous practice that ignores the histories of Latinx human beings suffering white nationalist hate—God made flesh is crucified daily with Brown human beings. Trump's foul immigration policy motivated the Walmart hate crime against

the Latinx community and many citizens who go to church sadly agreed with the authoritarian values articulated by a misfit president who disregards the national narrative that suggests to be American means embracing the ideals of freedom and equality; indeed, the new symbol of America over the last four years became the Wall to keep the “motley throng” out, to borrow from the words of nativist poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich. The barrier between the first and developing world was outfitted with searchlights, guard towers, barbed wire, watchdogs, and a burgeoning ethno-targeting border police force. While a subdivision of the Christian community through local congregations and faith-based organizations has resisted and challenged immigration policy, pastoral care and justice advocacy for strangers is still not an essential ethical concern in the life of ecumenical Protestant congregations—peace, joy, milk and cookies is more properly appealing in churches.

The United Methodist Church that I serve should recall John Wesley preached on the condition between the rich and the poor and called for relationality as a vehicle for mutual salvation. Wesley expected members of his community to express hospitality to the poor and in the context of hate for strangers this today means the church takes up the issue of migration not from a nationalist perspective, but from within a faith community of love and welcome for destitute Central American migrants seeking a safe haven and opportunities for a new life. John Wesley explained,

One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that... one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it — and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness heartedness.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it is important for the church to be involved in face-to-face ministry with destitute asylum seekers and border crossers. The scriptural tradition suggests that by staying close to

human suffering and vulnerable people in need the people of God learn how to live awake in the gospel.

It does not take anyone very long to realize by reading scripture that displacement, homelessness and migration are universal themes in the Bible that direct the people of God to engage in an ethic of hospitality that offers comfort to people displaced from their native lands for various and different reasons. Ecumenical Protestant churches should not overlook the mothers with children arriving on the southern border who give witness to life in the Northern Triangle of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—ravaged by gang violence and poverty that forces them to escape. Theologically, recall that Jesus' anticipated birth happens in the context of the Herodian massacre of the innocents (Matt 2:16–18). Like the Exodus story, the Holy family flees death and suffering just like the millions of undocumented in the Latinx community, among others. If you visit a detention center, and listen to young mothers share stories like that found in Matthew about the separation of the sheep and the goats. They tell American Christians Jesus spoke this parable to remind followers of the importance of welcoming the stranger (xenos) and such an act of kindness is a sign of righteousness. Care for the stranger is care for God!

### **Jesus and Hospitality**

Between 2016-2020, the White House's dystopian imagery about the Central American caravan and immigrants of color in America—criminal aliens, Islamist terrorists, clash of civilization, immigrant-driven job loss and downward wage pressure—was accommodated despite its outrageously fallacious treatise that encouraged dismissal of a public Christian witness predicated on a theological understanding of a radically welcoming God. Ecumenical Protestant leaders should have crowded the public square to say in the gospels that Jesus' solidarity with the rejected, loathed and marginalized makes the ethic of hospitality a duty of Christian witness in a

suffering world. What is the point of confessing Christ, if individuals and Christian institutions follow the Galilean savior disregarding their teacher crosses cultural boundaries, breaks rules, touches the sick and eats with outcasts in his ministry (e.g., Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 11:46-52; Matt 26:6-3; Luke 19:1-10). Jesus was once a displaced person and he is always on the road demanding followers to see God with the oppressed-poor and loathed outsiders who are criminalized, trampled, exploited and kept, when not jailed, at the margins of society. Justice and mercy that is inaccessible to asylum-seeking Central American migrants and hard-working undocumented Latinos/as signifies national society has turned away from its own wells of democracy.

Christian hospitality is reflected by an ethic of compassion and welcome toward strangers and rejected human beings without regard for what benefit kindness returns to the church.<sup>ii</sup> Hospitality toward Central American migrants is one of the ways for the ecumenical Protestant community to participate in the life of God. Hospitality is the practice in a society too often driven by a culture of indifference that keeps the Christian community faithful to the good news of God made flesh in a vulnerable person of color from a peripheral region of a conquered land. Love for the stranger suggests that God on the border weeps for us whenever silence allows the possibility that the parenthood of God does not mean the kinship of all people in shared creation. If American Christians are going to find God in the church and themselves, God must be sought in the brown flesh despised at the Southern border where Christians are required to show hospitality until it hurts (Mother Teresa). Certainly, treating strangers with hospitality is the mark of a society that reflects greatness by sharing its resources with those in need and embraces the possibility that those who come as strangers are received as guests, or eventually citizens.

In a nation experiencing the mass movement of persons across the Southern border and fierce debate concerning the plight of immigrants, refugees and undocumented Latinos/as in it,



the good news to preach is Jesus is identified with the poor, rejected, broken-hearted, and captive (Luke 4:16-21), therefore churches are to be present in mission and the suffering of the least members of society (Matthew 25). Christianity is a religion of hope that creates a community of radical welcome that makes outsiders part of its common life and sets aside xenophobia in favor of society based on a solidarity of difference. In other words, the church is a diverse community that recollects the joy of redemption offered by a human being of color who signifies God takes human flesh at the margins of society in order to save the world from its cruel self. This means Jesus tasks the church with cultivating a new human community that acknowledges the worth and common humanity of the neediest outcasts and finds Christ incarnate in them. Central American migrants are saying from their jail cells in detention centers the church is a sign of the inbreaking reign of God in Christ when it bears witness to the Galilean itinerate preacher honoring differences within its national boundaries and for the sake of God's creation.

The church forfeits the loyalty of the oppressed-poor when it turns its back on immigrants, strangers, global migrants and tens of thousands of undocumented human beings. I see no point in gathering once a week to read scripture, sing hymns and say prayers with baptized people who represent the body of Christ in history if they do not feel compelled to practice kindness to persons who cross the border seeking equity, justice, and safety. White ecumenical Protestant communities and congregations of color immersed in an epistemology of whiteness that participate in xenophobic rhetoric and practices will benefit by showing care, welcome and bringing despised strangers down from the lynching trees scattered along the border. I have no doubt that a pathological determined xenophobic Christianity cannot withstand a community of Christian citizens who dare to bear witness in the world to a God of life who in the prophetic words of Isaiah

(1:17), “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

Jesus, who read from the Isaiah in the Temple, taught a social ethic of compassion and inclusion of strangers even when it requires breaking societal rules. In other words, love is not conditional, it knows no boundaries and it is welcoming in any place and time. Hospitality reaches out across the boundaries of difference to take the religious community beyond the rhetoric of fear and hate to the places it can participate in God’s justice in the world with the aim of participating in the divine project of righting the human condition. Theologian Letty Russell reminds us that the church should always be a sign of God’s love of “riotous difference,” a place where strangers heal, a voice that advocates justice for trampled human beings and a gathering that denounces societal practices that oppress strangers. I find it curious that in the Hebrew Bible, we are commanded only once to love ourselves; yet, there are more than thirty references to show love to strangers, “aliens,” or outsiders. In this context, the people of God are reminded that life begins for them as strangers in a foreign land. We are repeatedly invited by the scriptural ethic to cross borders and love those who have dissimilar ethnic, religious and cultural sensibilities.<sup>iii</sup> Today, the practice of hospitality in a world experiencing border crossing, especially from Central America, means declaring God is intolerant of injustice, welcomes strangers, and takes to the road like them in Christ.

Mainline Protestant congregations or the ecumenical mainline tradition is saturated with racism and xenophobia toward the Central American community crossing the border to become new Americans. For Christians who claim to champion the cause of the vulnerable and the human rights of people of color it is rather duplicitous to acquiesce to the perception that leads to a qualification in the meaning of inclusivity. When I attended seminary in the late-70s and early-

80s, when the U.S.-supported Civil War was ravaging Guatemala and El Salvador and the sanctuary movement issued forth to defend undocumented Central Americans denied asylum, I thought it a major contradiction that White theologians found it easier to partner with theologians of liberation in Latin America while disregarding their brothers and sisters crossing the border to escape U.S.-financed violence. It was deeply troubling to observe white mainline congregations and their theologians render the undocumented Central American and the U.S. Latino community invisible in their work and remaining silent in church. Things have not changed very much with white theology and its church's response to the plight of migrants on the southern border.

For the sake of the gospel, mainline ecumenical Protestant churches are called in an increasingly changing society revitalized by border crossers to reopen congregational culture by developing what Walter Brueggemann calls a prophetic imagination that inspires a theological identity and ministry that evokes a “consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture” around it.<sup>iv</sup> God and the encounter with Christ on the road as an original stranger (Luke 24:13-35) empowers us to imagine a way of life alternative to that upheld by a controlling culture that is deaf to the cry of destitute migrants and blind to border crossers who at best are a social justice cause for a minority in the ecumenical Protestant tradition, rather than human beings who display the ongoing passion of Christ in the world. In the United States, Christians need to be reminded that Jesus reached out to people that were not like him, were crushed by the rules of society, and disdained by the guardians of established piety. Serious reflection on the role of small subdivisions of the ecumenical Protestant tradition with respect to immigrants' rights suggests that a focus on divine transcendence should never minimize the theological social ethical importance of ministry to human beings in the world God aims to save from a place of marginality—Golgotha!

Christians who are concerned about the plight of Central American border crossers, immigrants and refugees can help others imagine a kinder future for a society built on the foundation of near Native American genocide, African enslavement and various historical projects of Latinx conquest. Today, Christ in strangers invites mainline Protestant congregations to welcome asylum seekers and displaced people from places like El Salvador. who carry to our shores the memory of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuits in El Salvador, their co-workers Julia and Celina, the four American churchwomen murdered by soldiers, and tens of thousands of Central Americans dead at the hands of military governments once supported by the United States, poverty and stories of present day gang violence. Indeed, these newcomers offer deep theological insights to American churches and embolden these communities to believe more in the gospel of a God of life and less in their pursuit of wealth, power and prestige, which never offers clues on how to build a just society.

Taking a prophetic stance in defense of Central American migrants and undocumented immigrants means confessing God is intolerant of injustice and welcomes all people to the banquet table (Isaiah 25). The ecumenical Protestant tradition must be more open to the disquiet of strangers and more rigorously cultivate a prophetic imagination in order to deeply understand God's universal love reaching out to all humanity from the world of marginality and oppressed-suffering. In the United States' anti-immigrant culture, mainline Christians are invited by Central American migrants and border crossing strangers to march to the edges of society and learn from loathed humanity how to turn swords into plowshares and construct a life together free from unjust structures, social violence, premature death and economic exploitation (Isaiah 65:17-25). The Galilean Savior who reveals God's outrage with destitution expects the church to be an instrument

of good news that advocates the defense of the human rights of strangers to the United States who are tomorrow's new Americans.

Immigrants' rights need to be moved from the margins of ecumenical Protestant church life to the center of its social ethical concerns. As we enter life in the United States with a new presidential administration, what will not disappear is the racist rhetoric the White House, many members of Congress, and millions of evangelicals apply to describe Central American migrants and undocumented Latinos/as who figure negatively in their vision of a white, ethno-state. While a sovereign state has the right to manage its borders in defense of the common good, Christians who follow a crucified God must be the first to say the common good of a diverse immigrant society is poorly handled when that is based on the denial of human rights to nonwhite migrants. The time has come to see the face of God in Central American newcomers, find the parents of migrant children who were separated from their families, provide a path to citizenship for the 11 to 12 million undocumented persons residing in the United States, expand a guest-worker program, and empower a family reunification provision in immigration law that allows additional green cards for family members of U.S. citizens.

In the Fall of 2018, you may remember Central Americans began walking to the southern border with the intention of crossing it and requesting political asylum; however, Trump, exploiting white fear, said the "migrant caravan" was full of "criminals" and a threat to Americans' safety and economic well-being. His remarks did not result in massive disruption and resistance to the oppressive political rhetoric and too few public theological statements were made about Christ's solidarity with Central American migrants. The ethos of the ecumenical Protestant tradition led to an irregular response to the concern for reviled strangers and a loosely articulated public challenge to Trumpian piety that held that Jesus stands against the poor, strangers, asylum-

seeking women and children, and loathed non-white human beings. Addressing this distorted theological view extends beyond the former president and demands a church culture concerned about strangers and willing to give voice to the voiceless migrant and create liturgies with a pedagogical value based on representing the Holy Family as migrants and emboldening worshipers to engage newcomers at local detention centers, the work place, and in church. In order to overcome the mentality that those unlike us are the incarnation of evil, we need church leaders then to encourage a wider knowledge of the world, church leadership that has the courage to preach, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in (Matt.25:35, NIV).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, for the church, migration presents a challenge for social witness and ministries of care. The ecumenical Protestant tradition is faced with the call to be compassionate and to love those placed in the way by God to love. Churches are faced with the need to take a prophetic stance with immigrants and refugees against the *injustices they confront in society*. American churches dare not forget that migration is at the center of its religious narrative, beginning with the call to Abraham, the dessert wandering toward freedom after the flight from slavery in Egypt, God's great border crossing from divinity to humanity in the birth of Christ, the Holy Famil's escape of State violence into Egypt, and the restless wandering of a missionary church that always welcomed the hospitality of others. The church may not ignore the scriptures that reminds it the God of Israel constantly demands an ethic in society that receives, respects and loves strangers, since humanity is made of them, "for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:33-34). In the gospel of Matthew, given the vulnerability of migrants and refugees throughout the world

and undocumented Latinos/as in the United States, the Christian role of advocating for the stranger (Matthew 25:35; 43) is a crucial matter of justice and a corporate expression of faith.

The ecumenical Protestant tradition in the United States that takes up the cause of Central American migrants, immigrants and refugees in society does so recalling that Jesus is born to immigrant parents (cf. Luke 9:58) and his ministry is marked by experiences of displacement. The voices of border crossers must be allowed to enter the life of dominant culture churches to disrupt the comfortable narratives reproduced in them that blind congregants to the plight of rejected outsiders. The ecumenical Protestant tradition must hear the cry of Central American migrants, the children caged, the mothers grieving who declare "foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58) and neither do any of us. Churches are not in a position to reproduce the insider-outside divide given that Jesus is identified as a "stranger" (Matt 25:35). In other words, hate for strangers is a rejection of Christ.

Costly discipleship in an anti-immigrant society means placing religious institutions in solidarity with the life and cause of those in most need and showing knowledge of God by acting compassionately in the world. What cannot be overlooked is that Christ the original stranger is on the southern Border and found among the undocumented human beings in the United States who yearn for justice in a crucifying world. Offering aid to Central American migrants and other border crossers is a legitimate aspect of the mission of the church for it affirms the human dignity of outsiders and seeks to ensure their equal access to economic, social, and political resources. Justice for the stranger means that those who contribute to our communities should be given opportunities for full membership in them. In short, God graciously enters the world in Christ to form a redemptive relationship with human beings, but it is a God of radical hospitality that enters history to draw us near through the good news preached to the poor who today are signified by border

crossers (Matt.11:5; Luke 4:18). God’s promises are spoken to us through the tears and stories of those deemed unworthy of love (Luke 6:20). I cannot imagine a better time than this moment to recall the words of the great sociologist, W. E. B. Dubois, “Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States [the ecumenical Protestant church].”

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<sup>i</sup> Wesley, *Works of John Wesley. Ill: Sermons* 3:71-114 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986), Sermon 98: 'On Visiting the Sick', pp. 387-88

<sup>ii</sup> Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 2006, xiii.

<sup>iii</sup> Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*. WJKP, 2009, 101.

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p.13.