

Created in God's Image

By Bishop Victor Galeone

"I quit!" The fact that the parish maintenance man quit without giving me two weeks notice had me upset. Until I could hire someone else, I needed a short-term replacement. So I called Mr. Troy, who operated the cleaning firm contracted by our parish school. Most of the workers on his night-shift operation were Hispanics. He agreed to let me have Lucho from Monday to Friday for \$12 an hour. He would bill the parish 40 hours each week and, in turn, would pay Lucho. Since Lucho spoke next to no English, I had to instruct him in Spanish about his daily duties.

It was well into the second week when I noticed Lucho's wedding band. "Lucho, I see that you're married. Do you have any children?"

"Si, Padre. Three. They're down in El Salvador with my wife."

"Do you get back to see them often?"

"No, I haven't seen them since I came to America six years ago."

"Six years! And why not?"

"I have no green card. If I leave the U.S. to visit them, I won't be allowed back in. And then we'd have real problems with no money to support them."

"How do you keep in touch?"

"Every first and third Saturday, at exactly 1:00 PM, my wife and kids go to the post office, where there's the only phone in town. That's when I call, and we spend about half an hour on the phone."

"Lucho, may I ask how much Mr. Troy is paying you for the parish work you're doing?"

"Seven dollars an hour."

If anyone is wondering why I did not confront Mr. Troy for shortchanging Lucho of a good portion of his wages, the reason is that he might have reported Lucho to the immigration authorities for deportation.

My purpose in recounting this episode is to put a face on the so-called illegal immigrants. I am the son of immigrants myself. True, they were legal. With a work permit, my father came to the States in 1922, leaving my mother behind with the baby. Since he wasn't a U.S. citizen yet, he could not bring her along. Back then the immigration quota was quite stringent for "Southern Europeans." Mother followed in June of 1928.

Against this backdrop, I would like to challenge all of us with the Church's teaching vis-à-vis the immigration challenge. I want to limit myself to some poignant reflections from my brother bishop, Thomas Wenski of Orlando, the former chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Migration. Bishop Wenski:

"We have a right and a duty to defend our borders and our security; but we are not a freer people when millions of our neighbors live in fear of a 'knock on the door' in the middle of the night. Spending so many resources chasing bricklayers, housekeepers, and waiters who are merely seeking a better life for their families--and whose labor we need--should no longer be an acceptable application of our security resources in a post 9/11 world. They are after all real criminals, drug dealers and terrorists to apprehend." (Letter to Sen. Bill Nelson, 3/15/06)

"Some of those who today most harshly criticize the engagement of Bishops on issues of public policy--whether on life issues, like abortion or stem-cell research, or on peace and justice issues, like the conduct of war or trade policy--forget that the great civil rights movement of the 1960s was in its inspiration and leadership a religious movement. Dr. King was a Baptist preacher--and those who swelled the ranks of marchers that faced down fire hoses and police dogs, were for the most part Church people. To those who told him to stay in the pulpit..., Martin Luther King said: 'The Church is

not the master of the state, nor is the Church its servant; the Church is to be its conscience.' Martin Luther King and those who linked arms with him touched the conscience of a nation and helped to bring an end to the legally sanctioned underclass made possible by unjust Jim Crow laws.

"We engage the immigration issue with the goal of touching the conscience of the nation and its leaders. Our proposal is about fashioning an immigration system that facilitates legal status and family unity in the interest of serving God-given dignity and the rights of every individual." (Migration Mass, 1/15/06)

"The Church's work in assisting migrants stems from the belief that every person is created in God's image. In the Old Testament, God calls upon his people to care for the alien because '...you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.' (Dt. 10:17-19) In the New Testament...Jesus himself was a refugee fleeing the terror of Herod. (Mt. 2:15) ... Jesus identified himself with newcomers and with other marginalized persons in a special way: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' (Mt. 25:35) " (Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, 5/22/07)