

Presbyterian and Undocumented

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According to the non-governmental organizations that work with immigrant issues, there are more than twelve million people (almost 4% of the population) living in the United States of America without legal documents. For many political leaders, the immigrant's issues have become an issue used in political campaigns in order to gain voters for the congressional elections. In doing so, they are fomenting fear toward immigrants and associating this issue to that of national security.

Apparently, the strategy is to expose the undocumented immigrants as a dangerous factor for national security, manipulating voters with the fear against terrorism. The real truth is that no one that has crossed the South border of the U.S. has been involved in terrorist attacks. The last terrorist attacks (excluding the frequent slaughters in schools and the murders that happen in many cities of the country) were carried out by people who were born in this country or arrived here legally by airports or crossing the North border.

Timothy McVeigh (convicted and sentenced to death for the attack in Oklahoma on April 19, 1995) and the hijackers (who caused the tragedy of the 11th of September of 2002) never crossed the South border of the country. Nevertheless, the political and informative manipulation tries to mix the problems of terrorism, national security, and undocumented immigration. The apparent aim of this perverse mixture is to overturn negative opinions on the immigrants from the South and to expose them as a danger, when the reality is totally different.

Undocumented immigrants are everywhere. In greater or smaller proportions in almost all the states of the country are immigrants who do not have legal documents. The great majority of them take up the hardest jobs that those who are citizens do not want to do. They work the most uncomfortable shifts and they do not have any rights. Frequently, they are abused and exploited and they do not have any alternative or defense.

They work in restaurants preparing and serving food (that many of you reading this article love to eat); they work cultivating and gathering the fruits that you have in your pantry. Perhaps they are cleaning your house or fixing your yard. Or they are congregated with you in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), praising our Lord Jesus Christ, offering their tithe as a symbol of genuine Christian commitment, preaching from the pulpit, or working on presbytery and synod committees.

The following is a real history about a person (could be a man or a woman) who is a member of the PC(USA) and undocumented. To respect the person's identity, no names and no personal references are used. Certainly, this is the common history of millions of Christians in the United States who live in the shadows and in fear. But with those who share this common history is hope that the biblical promise will be fulfilled: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers,

for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:4, 6-10).

When did you come to this country?

I came after I finished my studies in education at the preparatory school. I graduated in education, but I have not had the chance to work in my profession. The truth is that I studied education as a second option. I wanted to study medicine, but unfortunately a poor person cannot study medicine. It is a very expensive career.

How have you felt being a teacher, having a profession and the capacity to develop a task that benefits the community, but without being able to work in it because you do not have documents?

For me, it was very hard to come and work in restaurants, factories, and cleaning services. It has been difficult ... very hard. I had to put my health at risk in some of the jobs I had to do. When you do not have documents, you are afraid to denounce labor abuse. But on the other hand, I have had to do these jobs out of necessity.

Why didn't you stay in your country if you are a professional teacher?

The salary that I could receive as a teacher in Mexico is \$400 a month. I cannot survive on this salary. Here, I can earn \$1,200 a month easily, which is a great difference. Even when there are a lot of bills to pay, I can live on this salary. I hope in God that my situation will change. I do not want to return to live in Mexico, because I have lived and seen close hand the poverty there. Even when it has been very hard to work, I have never lived in poverty conditions here that I experienced in Mexico.

It is important to highlight that teachers are very poorly paid in almost all Latin American countries. For a couple of decades now, the international financing entities (International Monetary Fund and World Bank, among others) have put pressure on governments to reduce their budgets (including education) in order to facilitate the privatization of public education, open opportunities for businesses, and grow the economy. Nevertheless, the effect of this measure has been the opposite: The poor people (the majority groups in Latin American societies) have been marginalized from receiving an education because they cannot pay for private education, and public schools have reduced their services.

One of the arguments that anti-immigrant politicians have used is that immigrants and their children are enjoying the schools and the American educational system without paying taxes. Therefore, the system will collapse. But one thing is certain: The immigrants and many of their children work very hard to produce gains for their bosses who pay taxes. In addition to that, many undocumented immigrants do pay taxes, and the ITIN (individual taxpayer identification number) is the sole legal document that is allowed to undocumented immigrants. In other words, many politicians do not like immigrants, but they like their taxes and cheap labor. A solution to this could be to give

undocumented immigrants the opportunity to legalize their status based on those who demonstrate honesty and responsibility in paying their taxes.

Knowing the dangers in crossing, the difficulties of living in this country, and the rejection of immigrants from many Americans, what motivated you to come?

The poverty in which we lived moved us to come here. We are nine brothers and sisters, and it was very difficult to live in Mexico. My father died when I was a child and my mother had to sustain all of us. I admire and love my mother because she taught us to improve our intellectual, economical, and spiritual conditions and gave us an example of honesty. Unfortunately, she did not have money to provide everything for us—not even to buy shoes for us ...I worked in supermarkets during my childhood in order to contribute toward the expenses in my house. This situation was not exclusive of my family; it was the situation of many other families around us.

All of us know there are many dangers in crossing the border. It seems to be a territory without law in many cases. There are many abuses and risks. How was your experience crossing the border?

Well, my first step was to meet with a group of people of my hometown. We traveled to one of the cities on the border, where we stayed in a hotel. Through one of the members of the group, we made contact with the “coyote”(those who cross the border with immigrants). At that time we had to pay \$1500 per adult and \$1000 per child.

We crossed at night. I crossed alone without any member of my family, but with a group of twenty other people—men, women, youngsters, and children. We were all Mexicans; although when we crossed the border, we found other groups and some of them came from Central America. We crossed by walking after midnight and we walked a half hour.

When we crossed into United States territory, a van was waiting for us. Only five of us could be seated; the rest had to travel by laying down on the floor, one over the other. We arrived at a place the “coyotes” had prepared for us to rest during that night.

I thank God. I consider myself to be a lucky person because it was very easy for me to cross and the “coyotes” treated us in a humanitarian way. They waited and helped us. But not all stories are like mine. We found a person on our way that was lost and apparently the “coyotes” had left her on her own in the desert.

This person was really lucky. Many stories and testimonies around the immigrant community are chilling. When we review how many dead bodies are found in the desert each month, we can understand the dangerous and terrible risk that immigrants have to confront in order to find a better future. Just on the Arizona border, 171 bodies were been found from October 2005 to October 2006¹. But there are many bodies that are never found because they are devoured by animals or stay hidden in the desert.

¹ According to the organization “No More Deaths” – “No Mas Muertes” (www.nomoredeaths.org).

In addition to the desire to escape from poverty and to find a better future, what other things impelled to you to come to the United States?

I have nine brothers and sisters. Some of them came over during the 70s and 80s. Through them, my mother could receive her “green card” after several years. When she arrived, she initiated the process to get my documents. Since I was a minor, I had to wait between three and four years to obtain my documents. Everything changed when we turned 21 years old. After that, we had to wait between twelve and eighteen years in order to meet with our families again.

Unfortunately, this person was the victim of fraud and unscrupulous lawyers. It is very frequently that immigrants are robbed because they do not have the resources and enough knowledge about the legal system. In addition, the fear of being deported makes immigrants the victims of incredible abuses and extortions. Now this person has lost money and time and could be subject to deportation.

For that reason, many people cross the border to meet with their families. In addition, this country is just one step from our country. People think that if today they are deported, tomorrow they will try to cross again. Unfortunately, it is more difficult for South Americans and Central Americans. All of us are here because of the situation in our countries—the difficulty of finding jobs and to escape from the poverty.

On the other hand, many people cross illegally because the United States does not give visas to poor or middle low-class people. They are the ones who have more necessity to come to work in this country, and they do not have legal ways to do it. There is not a system that allows poor workers to come and work legally. It is why we hear frequently among immigrants, “We prefer to die trying to cross than to die of hunger and misery in our countries.”

To listen to a person who has lived through all these situations is a faith challenge. How we can condemn those who break “the law” to find honest jobs, food, and a better future for their families? Interviewing this person reminded me of Matthew 12:1-8, when the disciples gathered a crop on the day of rest. The mass media have the tendency to reproduce stereotypes and manipulations that many politicians use to stress that the undocumented immigrants are illegal and criminals.

“But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matthew 12:7).

Do we consider as a criminal the one who breaks the law to flee from hunger and misery? Those who look for honest work? Those who try to support their families with their effort? Is the person a criminal who lives an honest life, loving God and living in faith? I think the real criminals are those who manipulate the lives of millions of people for their political and economic benefit.

How do you feel being a member of the body of Christ and in an illegal situation?

I am at peace with my conscience because I do not abuse anyone and I follow the way of Christ. Circumstances force many people to cross the border, but it cannot make us criminals. It cannot be criminal to look to survive, without abusing or damaging anybody.

In addition, faith in Christ has helped me a lot in all the situations I have had to live. From the moment when I crossed the border, I was always praying to God, requesting safety and that the immigration patrol would not catch us. And that if they did return us, I prayed to have the opportunity to try again until I would be able to cross successfully.

In the past and in the present, faith has maintained my life. Even when I am living a hard situation (without residence or Social Security) I feel that God gives me peace and hope that sooner or later my situation is going to be solved. I cannot do anything about the legal matter, but I know that God helps me by opening alternatives to fix my problem. Jesus always has been with me, he has never left me, and I hope to be always following him.

Some people in the PC(USA) think that all immigrants who come from Latin America are Catholics and they do not need to change to another church. Some others think it is not appropriate to evangelize among them because they already have their religion. But others (like me) think those are excuses that many people give for not wanting to open the church to other races and cultures.

Why do you attend, participate, and work in the Presbyterian Church?

In my family we have been Christian for generations, and we are proud of our faith. In Mexico, we attended a Protestant church. The church that we always attended supported and helped us. I remember the church structure was made with mud in the beginning ... after that they expanded the building and improved the facilities. We always found a message of improving and studying. Unfortunately, there are many other children who do not have that support and the message to go to school. They do not have money to pay for materials or uniforms, or even to have breakfast before school.

On the other hand, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America has helped me to grow as a human being, to be more sensible with others, and to be concerned about how I can help others ... others who have more needs than I do. That is what I have seen in the Presbyterian Church, a strong solidarity with those in need. I have known other churches, but in the Presbyterian Church I have found more unity, joyous people, joy in the midst of a community experience of faith, and especially friendship, a lot of friendship.

I want to say to my brothers and sisters in the PC(USA)—to those who did not have to emigrate, to those who were born and grew up here: Do not forget people who, like me, have had to fight a lot to be able to be here legally; to help those good people who come to this country to work hard; do not be influenced by those who stereotype immigrants as

a threat to this country. I believe there are good things and bad things inside people and we cannot judge all by the bad actions of a few people. In addition, as Christians we know that we are not to judge other people.

There are millions of people in this country and many in the Presbyterian Church with a story similar to this. Unfortunately, it is easier to show immigrants (who do not have access to mass media) as a dangerous factor for national security than to have a debate with clarity (without hypocrisy and the double morale that characterize the migratory debate in the United States) around the inefficiency of the immigration system. The current debate does not adapt to the economic, social, and political needs of the country. And it makes this country more separated from the rest of the continent.

Many irresponsible politicians have found the perfect excuse: “The corruption and inefficiency of the Latin American government make their people live in poverty.” But, it would be necessary to clarify that most of those governments are endorsed, approved, and supported by U.S. foreign policy.

The repressive policies, erection of walls, and criminalizing laws over immigrants are not the solution. It is necessary to understand that this country cannot be separated from the rest of the continent, and that we have to live as a community. We are on the same planet and we are mutually dependent. Therefore, a right migratory reform is necessary.

It is a great historical contradiction to create walls in a time of globalization and opening, especially when this country is one of the paladins of globalization and free global trade. Fortunately, the history of the world ratifies to us that walls become empty monuments to incoherence after years of time. From the walled cities of the past to the Berlin Wall in more recent history, pillars and concrete never have been able to stop people. This time will not be the exception.