
Letter to the Bishop

by Joe Ecclesia

A Plea for Clarity

Your Excellency:

I trust you are in robust spirits as you face the rigors of the Christmas season. Surely, nowhere is there greater evidence that sin is a good wrongly twisted than in the manner in which we Americans celebrate Christmas. Contrary to our Church's teaching, which emphasizes the penitential and preparatory aspects of Advent, many Catholics (like other Americans) spend December shopping like mall rats, eating and drinking like sybarites, and dashing from party to party like girls during a sorority rush. Is it any wonder so many celebrants are delighted to see the backside of Christmas? On the Feast of Stephen, brigades of holiday-weary women hurl denuded conifers curbside for pickup, while strong, otherwise stoic men weep at kitchen tables over smoldering credit cards. Christmas-tide, that garland of feast days leading to Epiphany when our hearts should be riotous with celebration, finds many of us staggering and wan, debilitated as bachelor uncles after a month-long bender.

Here, Your Excellency, you deserve our thanks. Every Advent, you and your fellow priests remind us to make Christmas more than a bacchanal of department stores and gluttony.

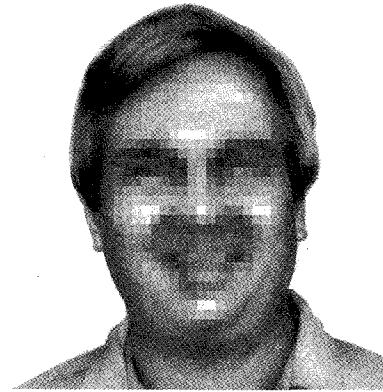
Speaking of reminders: One of our parish priests gave yet another homily on the Catholic obligation to applaud the ongoing invasion of the United States. About once a month, Father beats us about the head with facts and fantasies regarding immigration. (He never uses the word *illegal*.) Last Sunday, he presented the standard arguments for open borders: We are a nation of immigrants; our economy would collapse without immigrants; immigrants do jobs Americans won't do. He ended with the theological right bower, reminding us that the poor will enter Heaven more easily than the rich. (A question, Your Excellency: If being poor is a virtue, why are we trying to eliminate poverty? I often give my pocket change to street beggars; am I keeping souls from Heaven?) Father also pointed us toward a recent statement from the Most Reverend William Skylstad, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in

which you and your fellow bishops support Father's position.

Accustomed to Father's one-sided arguments and his attacks on the fascists and bigots in the pews—*i.e.*, white folks—I confess I paid scant attention to his homily. Only when he mentioned the Catholic ideal of a living wage did I perk up, attuned not to his remarks on immigration but to his abuse of language and reason. Didn't he realize that immigrants help to keep wages low?

Wondering whether Bishop Skylstad's missive was equally illogical, I found the statement on comprehensive immigration reform on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website (uscbb.org). Praiseworthy for its brevity (it isn't quite 300 words) and general clarity (Churchese is minimized), this "statement" is nonetheless lacking in fairness and diction. Archbishop Skylstad writes that you bishops have heard from many people, including Catholics, who oppose the flood of illegal immigrants, but he never cites the reasons for their opposition. He writes that we must practice compassion toward immigrants but doesn't address the plight of thousands of workers here in Western North Carolina—and the millions nationwide—whose jobs went to Mexico or China. He advocates fairness but doesn't mention the financial distress of a Mexican-American in California whose construction company must compete with cheap illegal labor. He demands a better life for immigrants but doesn't hint at the burden placed on taxpayers by the increased cost of social services and schools.

This lack of fairness and charity are reflected in the document's offenses against the English language. The writers of this "statement"—only a committee could compose prose this awful—prefer the passive to the active voice, a voice favored by politicians (and, apparently, bishops) to escape responsibility for their actions. The writers haul out certain catch phrases (my favorite is "the human person," an expression favored by our late pontiff that now appears routinely in Church missives. Human person as opposed to what? Squirrel persons? Inhuman persons? The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity?



What in the name of Strunk & White do you mean?) In an ugly use of the adverb, the writers tell us our immigration policy needs "to be reformed urgently," though they don't explain why you bishops have waited 40 years to demand urgent reform. Is it because most Americans now oppose illegal immigration? The writers state that "the status quo is morally unacceptable" without telling us what the "status quo" is. Finally, the authors write with a smug, sanctimonious tone inimical to Christian debate.

After glancing at some other dreadfully composed USCCB documents, let me make a suggestion, Your Excellency. Go online and search for George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." Distribute copies of this essay to your staff. Mail them to your fellow bishops. Many will be sympathetic, at least before they read the essay, for, like them, Orwell was a lefty. The difference between him and many lefty Church bureaucrats is that Orwell had the guts to call a lie a lie when he heard one. After citing examples of dishonest writing in what he called "a catalogue of swindles and perversions," Orwell discusses at length why "political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness."

Much the same can be said of ecclesiastical language. From the loophole-riddled documents of Vatican II to the bloated, ineffectual statements of the USCCB, the Church has often sown discord and confusion in the place of Truth. Given this failing, I might also recommend the USCCB hire someone trained in grammar and logic to vet its written pronouncements. Perhaps then more people might begin listening to you again.

Wishing you a Blessed Advent,

Joe Ecclesia

Life in a Border Town

The archetypal middle-sized town in the middle of the Middle West, Rockford seems about as far removed from the border as you can get, unless we count the border with Wisconsin, a few miles to the north. And yet, Rockford has been subject to successive waves of immigration that have brought with them (if in muted form) the cultural and political tensions typical of an actual border town. From Yankees to Scots and Irish to Swedes to Italians and Sicilians (there is a difference), with multiple waves of Germans washing over them all (and forming, even today, the largest ethnic group in Rockford), to Poles and Lithuanians and, more recently, Asians (especially Vietnamese and Laotians) and various ethnic groups from the former Yugoslavia, immigrants to Rockford have never fully coalesced into a common identity, giving the lie to the myth of the melting pot.

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, Midwestern Yankeedom ceased to provide a common culture that all could participate in, if not exactly share. Throughout the Midwest, the preponderance of Deutschlanders naturally meant that an anglicized version of German culture slowly took its place, but the anti-German hysteria of World War I put serious kinks in that development, and World War II drove the final nails in the coffin (though remnants survive in such places as Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and St. Louis). Today, Rockford is described as either a Swedish or an Italian (meaning Sicilian) town, and those two ethnic groups dominated Rockford politics throughout most of the 20th century and continue to do so today. (Despite his name, our current mayor, Larry Morrissey, is half Sicilian.)

And now, the latest wave of immigration is transforming Rockford once again. As late as the 1990 Census, Hispanics (meaning Mexicans) made up less than three percent of Rockford's population. Today, they have topped ten percent and are poised to overtake blacks in the not-too-distant future. Ss. Peter and Paul, formerly a Lithuanian Catholic church, is now commonly referred to as Ss. Pedro y Paulo, and the pastor has been an outspoken supporter of the recent marches in favor of illegal immigrants. Having first

colonized the neighborhood along South Main Street (originally Yankee, then Italian, and primarily black by the late 1960's), Mexican immigrants are now establishing restaurants, stores, and auto shops throughout the city. The Rockford Public School District has an extensive bilingual program (thanks, in part, to our 12-year-long school-discrimination lawsuit), and many businesses (especially banks and restaurants) and (of course) government offices have signs in English and Spanish—an increasing number with Spanish placed first.

When a town lacks a dominant culture (as Rockford does), such changes can cause unease among its citizens (as they have). Combine the sheer number of newcomers with rising crime rates and recent statistics showing that one fifth of Rockford's population falls below the poverty line, and Rockfordians have good reason to regard this wave of immigration as somewhat different from previous ones.

Besides ethnicity, however, there's another factor that's often overlooked when discussing current immigration, and it, too, makes Rockford—and most other towns throughout the Midwest—a sort of border town. This border is also cultural, but it cuts across ethnic groups. In fact, in some ways, more recent immigrants, to the extent that they remain ghettoized through language, religion, and cultural practice, tend to fall on what I regard as the right side of the border, while those who have "made it"—of any ethnicity—are more likely to cross over. In this sense, some recent Mexican immigrants share more with the Poles of Tony Bukoski's Superior, Wisconsin, than they do with their countrymen who came here 20 years ago. And I'm not talking about the religious affiliation that Catholic defenders of legal (and even illegal) immigration place far too much stock in.

This particular cultural border runs between those who still want to live as most civilized (and here, I'm using a fairly broad definition of *civilization*) men have lived down through the ages—a settled life, in stable communities, among people like themselves, close by their parents and the graves of their ancestors—and those postmodern nomads who believe that happiness lies not in memory



but in amnesia—cultural, familial, even personal. "Know thyself!" means nothing when your self is really no different from your neighbor's, just as your vinyl-sided ranch that you intend to "own" only long enough so that you don't lose money when you sell it is, at most, just a mirror image of his house (not home). McDonald's and Wal-Mart and Microsoft and Hollywood don't have a monopoly grip on Americans in spite of their preferences; they have become monopolies or near-monopolies because too many people prefer the mediocrity of convenience to the inconveniences of real life.

To the extent that new immigrants really do come here out of economic necessity, and not out of a desire to forget their own past, they may fall on the right side of this cultural divide. Unfortunately, the very fact of their mobility makes it harder for them to remain there. Shorn of their connections to the place and community of their birth, they may find the glitter of fresh plastic all too appealing.

None of this is offered as a defense of current levels of immigration or of the ethnic mix of immigrants today—far from it. I'm in favor of a complete moratorium on immigration—not until the current crop of immigrants has "assimilated" but until we've all had an opportunity to put down sufficient roots in our own particular ways—until we've built our own churches and our own restaurants and our own grocery stores and our own neighborhoods and become Americans without losing what was best in our particular pasts (and, one hopes, while abandoning what was worst). Then, and only then, could far more moderate levels of immigrants than we currently see be welcomed into such communities, to which they might truly assimilate in a way that no immigrant could possibly assimilate to our "nation" or "culture" today. 