



From A Bishop's Journal (628)

Immigration and the Protection of Refugees

Never before over the past 70 years has such a large proportion of Canadians originated from other countries. With almost 20 percent of Canadians being immigrants, a pastoral letter released by the Canadian Catholic Bishops outlines a number of problems which they say are having a serious impact on immigrants and refugees. Here are a few excerpts.

175 million migrants

Being a migrant is the reality for 2.9 per cent of the world population today. At least 175 million men, women and children are estimated to be living outside their country of origin; this includes economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. More than ever before, migration is a structural phenomenon of society and a bitter reality of the human condition.

18% of Canadians

According to the 2001 census, 18 per cent of Canadians were born outside the country - this is the highest this rate has been over the past 70 years. In 2004, Canada received 235,824 newcomers from a number of countries, of whom 14 per cent were refugees. Because of lack of political will together with priority being given to security preoccupations, recent Canadian policies for the protection of refugees have become much more restrictive. In 2005, Canada will probably have the lowest number of refugee claimants since the mid-1980s. One reason for this is the control measures the Canadian government has implemented, including the Safe Third Country Agreement between Canada and the United States of America which came into effect in December 2004. This requires asylum-seekers to make their claim in whichever of the two countries they first enter. Opposed by the Catholic Bishops of Canada and many refugee advocacy groups in both countries, this agreement is particularly worrying for asylum-seekers who would be accepted as refugees in Canada but have difficulty obtaining U.S. protection.

Increased difficulties

The Government of Canada is also involved in other practices which regrettably fail to live up to the international agreements to which this country is signatory. Arab and Muslim communities, in particular, seem to suffer from racial profiling that has taken various forms: longer waits for immigration processing from areas such as North Africa; the indefinite detention of persons who have been issued security certificates; as well as possible Canadian complicity or at least lack of diligence in the alarming practice of "extraordinary rendition" of Canadian nationals to countries where torture is practised. No person

should be sent back into a situation where their lives will be in danger or they are subject to torture. It is a fundamental inversion of values, according to Catholic teaching, when laws and policies place national interests and security before human dignity.

Sanctuary

In summer 2004, the then federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, publicly asked Churches to abandon the tradition of offering sanctuary to refugee claimants under the threat of deportation. In the preceding months, eight parishes or congregations from different Christian denominations had offered sanctuary to people whose need for protection had not been recognized by the federal government. In March that year, Quebec City police entered a church belonging to the United Church of Canada and arrested an Algerian refugee. This violation of sanctuary broke a tradition that until then had been respected in Canada. The response of Church leaders was to point out that the problem is not recourse to sanctuary, but the flawed Canadian refugee determination system that leaves too many refugees without protection.

Right to appeal

Determining refugee status can mean a decision involving the death of a human being. Yet it is the one and only judicial decision for which an appeal mechanism does not exist. A refugee whose claim is turned down by a single officer at the Refugee Board hearing ought to have the right to appeal. The Parliament of Canada has recognized this, and provided for such an appeal in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act adopted in June 2002, but the government has refused to implement the appeal system. Members of all four federal political parties on two occasions in 2005 presented the House of Commons with over 24,000 signatures in an ecumenical petition calling for the implementation of the Refugee Appeal Division.

Separation of families

One of the greatest sufferings that many migrants face is separation from children and spouses. The separation of families, which can last as long as several years, has a detrimental effect on all, but particularly on children and youth. The fees required for permanent residence status; [19] the numerous steps involved, including security checks, DNA tests and medical examinations; and slow administrative processes are major factors in causing long delays.

Migrant agricultural workers

There are also growing concerns about the more than 18,000 seasonal agricultural workers, mostly from Mexico and the Caribbean, who come each year to do work that Canadians are less interested in doing. The conditions offered are not always respectful of human dignity, in part because of extended work periods without time off, poor housing conditions and lack of due medical attention.

+ François Thibodeau ym

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

01-18-06