

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
“Kinship Across Borders: Catholic Ethics and Migration”

presented on November 7, 2017

by
Dr. Kristin E. Heyer

Dr. Jane Regan:

It's my pleasure to introduce Dr. Heyer, and really honored to be welcoming her as a colleague in Boston College. Kristin Heyer is professor of theological ethics in the Boston

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[Applause]

Dr. Heyer:

Thanks very much to Professor Regan. Thanks also to Melinda Donovan and Dean Stegman for this invitation to join you all this evening. I've appreciated opportunities to collaborate with the STM upon my return to Boston College two years ago. And thanks to all of you for coming out tonight. It's Election Day, post-midterms, pre-holiday crunch. I'm, I'm grateful that you're here.

And actually, concerns about immigration featured in in some of the ads surrounding today's races, particularly in Virginia and New Jersey races, we heard about concerns about immigrants. So I think this is particularly timely to speak this evening, because in my view, immigration really is one of the most urgent signs of our times. And I think this rich tradition of reflection on justice for immigrants can promote a shared good for citizens and newcomers alike.

I think really the time is ripe here in the United States for resources from Catholic ethics to shape discourse about immigration, and I hope offer a counter narrative to the myths that dominate our airwaves. Significant changes brought by President Donald Trump during the first year of his presidency directly reflect his campaign rhetoric that cast immigrants and refugees as threats to the United States. Trump campaigned on promises to deport undocumented immigrants and secure the border with Mexico, a country he charged with sending its criminals, drug dealers, and rapists.

He moved swiftly to make good on campaign promises, issuing executive orders within the first few weeks of his presidency that called for constructing a wall at the U.S.-

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and symbolizing the centrality of a law-and-order bravado to his immigration narrative. So another common paradigm deems immigrants economic threats, whether as a net burden on the tax base or competitors for finite social resources and low-wage work opportunities. And this is typically a perception heightened in times of economic downturn.

Beyond studies that consistently show immigrant laborers provide a net benefit to the U.S. economy, the recent estimates indicate, for example, that DACA recipients alone would provide \$460.3 billion to the GDP over the next decade, if DACA survives or is resuscitated. But beyond that, the detention industry profits off of their regular migrants and kind of confounds this economic threat frame.

Elements of the immigration industrial complex have become a transnational multibillion dollar affair. Private companies house nearly half of our nation's immigrant detainees compared to about 25% a decade ago. Share prices for Geo Group and Corrections Corporation of America rose over 100% after Election Day given the president's avowed commitment to increase the incarceration of immigrants. It's called for nearly doubling the number of immigrants detained to 80,000 per day.

And their associates have funneled more than \$10 million to candidates since 1989,

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Fear of difference is relatively easy to mass market, and it shapes society's imagination in powerful ways. Encounters with reluctant or desperate migrants signals significant dissonance between these exclusionary frameworks and the inhumane impact of recent rhetoric and measures alike. Now, I open with this context in order to shed light on the interests and the values that I think drive our immigration discourse.

If fear and profit largely hold sway dehumanizing newcomers according to these dominant scripts, then I'd like to suggest that Catholic commitments shape a different story, a counter-narrative of our common humanity, our kinship, with implications for a just immigration ethic. I think Christian understandings of what it means to be human, radically critique the pervasive exploitation and these prevailing paradigms.

So this evening I'd like to outline how insights from Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching challenge myths that enable exclusion and abet division. So certainly, the story of Jewish and Christian pilgrim communities is one of migration, diaspora, and the call to live accordingly. Indeed after the commandment to worship one God, no moral imperative is repeated more frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures than the command to care for the stranger. Despite convenient amnesia in our own nation of immigrants, it was Israel's own bitter experience of displacement that undergirded its ethic of just compassion toward outsiders: So "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you are aliens in the land of Egypt."

When Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled Egypt, the emigre Holy Family becomes the archetype for every refugee family. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins his early journey as a migrant and displaced person. Jesus, who in the same Gospel would radically identify with the least, and make hospitality to the stranger the criterion for judgment.

Patterns of migration across Scripture do not readily resolve complex modern dilemmas. Yet Scripture shapes our moral perception. So by engaging the voice of Scripture in a manner that dislocates these dominant frameworks of interpretation, we can become more attuned to how our perspective shapes our moral response and really how Scripture might enhance our perceptive imagination.

So if our conventional politics of immigration are driven by instrumental values, how might a scriptural potu

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The Tradition makes clear that every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines human dignity realized in community. Pope John Paul II condemned the exploitation of migrant workers based on the principle that capital should be at the service of labor and not labor at the service of capital. This is one of my favorite pictures of him. He's touring a soda manufacturing plant. I mean, it's an Italian chemical plant, but they're making soda in 1982 here.

So this idea that the economy should serve the person raises serious concerns not only about the freedom of markets compared to people, but also the significant financial stakes in a broken immigration system. Detained immigrants fill beds, private buses are filled with deportations. So we inherit a counter-narrative of economic ethics critiquing global dynamics that allow capital and goods and information to flow freely across borders, but not laborers.

Pope Francis has been outspoken about the dictatorship of faceless economies. His image of humans as commodities in a throwaway culture, particularly resonates, I think, with vulnerable migrant workers' experiences. The Southern Poverty Law Center's interviews with undocumented women across sectors of the food industry indicate respondents overwhelmingly feeling like they're seen by employers as disposable workers with no lasting value, to be squeezed of every last drop of sweat and labor before being cast aside.

And I include Archbishop Oscar Romero here, as I think he more poetically elaborates the understanding in the tradition of work as necessarily intelligent and free. He writes, "How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their work, their job, is a priestly work. That just as I celebrate Mass at this altar, so each carpenter celebrates mass

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Dr. Heyer:

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But I agree with the tension you're raising because I think simply listing these as commensurate principles leads to that cherry-picking problem. I had a second thought that

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