

Encountering Transcendence

Contributions to a Theology of
Christian Religious Experience

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XI

Undocumented Migration and Religious Experience A Theological Interpretation of the Mexican-American Border

Daniel G. Groody

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1. Introduction

21 About sixty miles south of the US/Mexican border near Nogales,
Arizona is a town called Altar, Sonora (Mexico). In recent years it has
become one of the major launching pads from which immigrants from
Mexico and Central America immigrate to the United States. Recently,
39 I met a woman named Maria who had just come up north from
Guatemala. When Maria left home she did not have any money for a
bus ticket, so she stowed away on a train, dangling from the outside of
a box car. For days at a time, she watched as people like her hung on
for life. Some fell off and lost an arm or a leg. Others were run over by
57 the train and presumably died. But others like her were lucky enough
to make it to the border, where a still even more difficult journey
awaited them.

83 Eventually, Maria made it to the town of Altar where she came to
understand new levels of sacrifice. She had neither friends nor relatives
there, nor did she know the route to cross over illegally into the United
States. So she hired a "coyote" smuggler, who would charge her \$2,000,
93 which was more than two years wages in Guatemala.¹ While her "coy-
ote" originally said the trek across the border would only last a few
hours, the journey across the desert ended up being more than she bar-
gained for. It took four days to cross the deadly and forbidding terrain
of southern Arizona, where she walked sixty miles in 120 degree heat
(50 degree Centigrade). After two days into the journey she ran out of
food. On the third she ran out of water. After hallucinations and
123 headaches, she started throwing up, until she could barely see straight.
After these four days of walking in the desert, after much struggle and

143 1. Though the fees for smugglers range from \$1,600 and higher, many immigrants
depend on relatives working in the United States to help offset some of the expenses for
the exorbitant coyote fees.

difficulty, the border patrol spotted her, apprehended her and put her in an immigration detention center.²

A few days later, she tried to cross again. And again. Three times she tried to cross the desert and three times she fell down to the ground, short of her goal of freedom the United States. Three times she ran out of food. Twice she ran out of water. Once a bandito gang robbed her at gunpoint. Once a coyote tried to rape her. And once she almost died of dehydration and heat stroke. After sharing with me in detail all her suffering in crossing the border, I felt moved to ask her a pointed question. I said, "if you had fifteen minutes to talk with God, what would you say?" After this there was a long pause. In the back of my mind, a long list of possibilities came to mind: "Why is life so difficult when all I want to do is feed my family?" "Why are you letting all these injustices happening to me?" or "Where are you, Lord, in the midst of my suffering?" among other things. As I waited for her response, she looked at me unnervingly, as if I asked a really stupid question. Wanting to explain the seemingly obvious to me, she said, "First of all, I don't have fifteen minutes to talk to God. You see, I am always talking to God, and God is always with me. But," she said, "if you ask me what I would say if I saw God face to face, the first thing I would do would be to thank Him. God has given me so much, and I have been so blessed by God, that the first words I would say are thank you for having been so good to me." Her answer stunned me; it challenged me then, and it continues to challenge me now. Stories like Maria's frequently have invited me over the years to examine the contours of religious experience of Mexican immigrants along the US/Mexican Border, especially amid such economic deprivation and misery. To my surprise, I have often found a paradoxical richness in their experiences that often goes undiscovered in contemporary American society.³

In this brief paper, I would like to do three things: (1) I would like to give an overview of the complex drama along the Mexican Border. This context is crucial to understanding the starting point for religious experience. (2) I would like to talk about some of the methodological and epistemological challenges involved in doing research on the spiritual

2. One of the principle responsibilities of the Border Patrol is the detection and apprehension of undocumented immigrants. They also have implemented a search and rescue unit called "BORSTAR." Designed to reach stranded immigrants who are lost in the desert, it also has tried to reduce the alarming number of deaths in the region.

3. See especially, Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) and *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

lives of immigrants along the border, and (3) I would like to identify a few themes that might serve as a starting point for reflecting theologically on religious experience among undocumented migrants along the US/Mexican border. It is my hope that such reflection will help us reflect more specifically on a theology and spirituality of migration.⁴

2. The Complex Drama of Undocumented Migration along the Mexican-American Border

Reflection on the religious experience of undocumented immigrants begins with a reflection on the harsh reality along the US/Mexican border.⁵ The US/Mexican border is a 1,952-mile long boundary that stretches from the shores of the Pacific Ocean near San Diego, California to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico near Brownsville, Texas.⁶ Politically, it is the frontier between Mexico and the United States. Geographically, it is the border between North American and South America. Economically, it is the dividing line between the poverty of Latin America and the prosperity of the United States. In a world more and more effected by globalization, many immigrants are struggling to rise above the tide of a drowning poverty, where they often make three dollars a day or less.⁷

4. The bibliography on theology and migration is not very extensive and relatively recent. See especially Giocchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella (eds.), *Migration, Religious Experience and Globalization* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003) and United States Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Strangers No Longer* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003).

5. My methodology echoes that of Virgilio Elizondo, Jon Sobrino and others, who see reality as the starting point for theological reflection, particularly as it emerges from the perspective of the crucified peoples of today. See Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); José Comblin, José Ignacio González Faus, and Jon Sobrino, *Cambio social y pensamiento cristiano en América Latina*, Colección Estructuras y proceso, Serie Religión (Madrid: Trotta, 1993); Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1978).

6. For more on immigration, see Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1998); Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) and Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

7. For more on the theme of doing theology in a globalized world, see Orlando Espín, "Immigration, Territory, and Globalization: Theological Reflections," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 7:3 (Febr. 2000) 46-59, and Paulo Suess, "Migração, peregrinação e caminhada como desafios da missão no mundo globalizado," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 238 (2000) 294-311.

Under such conditions, the prospects of immigrating to the United States and earning forty dollars a day or more draws them into the country like a magnet.

Each day, thousands of immigrants try to enter the United States illegally through the southern border. While in the last fifty years it has never been easy to cross from Mexico into the United States, it has become particularly difficult to cross in the last decade. Because of newer, restrictive border policies, many physical obstacles and natural barriers such as long, vast deserts make it now not only dangerous to cross but even deadly. Unable to obtain proper documentation for political and economic reasons, these immigrants, in their desperation, cross through desolate areas in order to by-pass long and impermeable walls, surveillance cameras, military technology and the vigilant eye of border patrol agents. They traverse high mountains and cross through waterless, inhospitable deserts in order to make it to the United States. Some run out of food and water along the way and never make it. Others are hospitalized with various kinds of heat related illnesses. Still others are apprehended and put in immigration detention centers and deported. And some, miraculously, make it across. But instead of a promised land which many hope to find on the other side of this wall of misery, or as it is sometimes called, "the tortilla curtain", they only find a whole new set of challenges awaiting them in the strange and foreign land of the United States.⁸

Indeed, it is ironic to consider that while the west hailed the crumbling of the Berlin wall in 1989, it scarcely balked at the construction of its own wall along the US/Mexican Border. And while those who lost their lives trying to cross the wall between East and West Germany were labeled internationally as heroes, those who die trying to cross the wall between Mexico and the United States often are not even recognized! To be more specific, between 1961 and 1989, 80 died people trying to cross the Berlin Wall from East to West Germany. Between 1995 and 2005, more than 3,000 immigrants have died trying to cross from Mexico into the United States. Today, on average, an immigrant a day dies trying to cross from Mexico into the United States.

In a few words, the US/Mexican border is a region of total marginality for the Mexican-Immigrant. It is a place where they undergo physical suffering, family separation, cultural displacement, political marginality, legal

8. For more on the deadly journey of immigration, see John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999).

vulnerability, economic destitution, and personal alienation, among other things. Only by paying closer attention to this context can we understand better the contours of the religious experience of these undocumented immigrants.⁹ In this context, my central question is this: What is the theology and spirituality that emerges from this apparently godless context?¹⁰

3. The Contours of Research along the Mexican-American Border

Research among undocumented immigrants begins with immersion into this world of marginality, into a world of "otherness," even when a researcher like me recognizes his own limitations because of his own social location. This research involved its own migration, its own moving out into unknown territory, of entering into its own kind of journey as I looked for migrants, entered into conversation with them or tried to unpack the dense richness of their stories. It involves a constant reexamination of my own social location and spiritual experience as I tried to "read" correctly the spiritual lives of these immigrants.

It is not easy to understand the rich and complex dimensions of religious experience among these immigrants. Not only are there practical difficulties with this kind of research (such as data gathering, access to subject's personal stories, legal complications and others) but also conceptual and epistemological ones.¹¹ The spiritual world of the migrant is often diffuse and capillary, sometimes fragmentary and difficult to follow. It is a world of the symbolic, the literary, the lyrical, the interpersonal, the transpersonal and the intuitive. These dimensions are not as easily translated into the frameworks more familiar to North American and European academics, who often work in the world of the rational, the logical, the conceptual, the systematic, the linear and the categorical. As I lived and worked within these two worlds myself, I realized that narrative only holds the methodological and hermeneutical key to unlocking much of the richness of their religious experience. Even while these narratives are varied, I tried to sift through those narratives that held

9. See Robert J. Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

10. For more on a spirituality of undocumented immigrants, see Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

11. For more on the role of culture in theological reflection, see Virgilio P. Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2000); *Gnadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

some kind of "luminous insight" into religious experience and the Christian life in contemporary culture in the United States. I then tried to find the points of critical correlation between the experience of these immigrants and the themes of Scripture and tradition.

My insights emerged from my relationship with migrants and many conversations with them. They taught me how to find theological insight through entering into the minds and hearts of those who struggled along the border. These insights would emerge when speaking with immigrants in detention centers, hospitals, shelters, train stations, border towns, agricultural fields, migrant camps, deserts, mountains, and along rivers and highways, where many were lost or stranded. In these places they shared their stories, their struggles, and their spirituality. I was particularly interested in how these immigrants in their unique cultural context experienced, understood and enacted their relationship with God.¹²

In addition, reflecting on the religious experience of immigrants required more than entering into "God-talk" or theological conversation with them. At first look, there is nothing apparently spiritual or theological in the journey of the immigrant. It often appears as if there is nothing overtly theological about their struggles. Some have even asked whether there is in fact even anything theological about a contextual analysis of the spirituality of undocumented immigrants. That is, some wonder whether what we are talking about here is more anthropology and sociology but not in fact theology. There are some merits to these objections, for often immigrants themselves do not even see the theological dimensions of their own struggles. Nonetheless, while at first glance there is nothing explicitly theological about the journey of the immigrant (nor, I would argue, did there appear to be anything theological about the crucifixion or the Exodus at the time it happened in history), on deeper reflection, each of these events unfolded a deeper truth about human life before God.

Nonetheless, certain theological questions opened up a wealth of insight. As I asked these immigrants if they could explain where God is for them in the midst of their experience, in what ways the life of Jesus resembles their own, in what ways the gospel helps them interpret their lives, they often come up with new and refreshing insights. Let me be clear about this, however. None of the immigrants I have spoken to see

12. I am grateful to Si Hendry, SJ, for helping me formulate a working definition for spirituality as "how one experiences, understands and enacts one's relationship with God." See also Sandra Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (March 1998) 1, 3-12.

their difficult migration journey as a spiritual pilgrimage. The desert is deadly, and many lose their lives there. If they experience anything in the desert it is temptation, not ecstasy.¹³ They cross borders because they have to; they risk their lives because they are looking for work, not because they are trying to actualize their spiritual potential or reach some kind of transcendent insight. Unlike the desert fathers and mothers of the early Church, no one goes into the forsaken borderlands seeking a "desert immersion experience."¹⁴ As one immigrant named Miguel said,

The desert was a place where I felt tempted, and after I fell down a number of times and thought I was going to die, it was a place where I simply felt tempted to resign, to give up, to stop fighting. Such experience gave me new insight into what Jesus went through in the desert, and his struggles gave me new hope as well.

As one goes to the deeper levels of life with these undocumented immigrants, that is, as one goes to the *corazón* or heart of their experience, one begins to see some of the deeper dimensions on which these immigrants live, dimensions which cannot be apprehended simply by participant observation studies, sociological analysis or another other forms of external observation, no matter what their merits.¹⁵ Theology as faith seeing understanding unveils some of the inner depths of their lives. As one is welcomed into their deepest selves – their *corazones* – one begins to see, underneath their struggles, a profound spiritual force that undergirds much of their experience.

Research among these immigrants often means being guided by a paradoxical and serendipitous mind. Not uncommonly I found faith amid tremendous adversity, life amidst death, wisdom among the illiterate. In the Gospel of Matthew we hear a striking statement by Jesus: "At that time Jesus exclaimed, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children'."¹⁶ The spiritual lives of immigrants often reveal

13. Mark 1:12-13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.

14. For more on the desert fathers and mothers, see Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975) and Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

15. Though often reduced to sentimentality in contemporary US American culture, the "heart" is, in fact, a rich center of knowledge in biblical theology, Aztec thought and contemporary Mexican culture. See especially Jean de Fraine and Albert Vanhoye, "Heart," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Defour (Paris: Desclée, 1967) 200-202; Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

16. Matt 11:25.

a disarming insight into God, human life and contemporary culture. To be clear, I would not for a moment even suggest the economically poor, like these immigrants, are always more spiritual or holy than others. For every story of luminous insight, I know of counter insights that could be offered, even from my own interviews with them. But more often than not, because they depend on God in radical and concrete ways, they bring out theological reflections that emerge from an appropriation of God into their daily lives during times when most would abandon any hope in God at all. Such wisdom, I would argue, is a gratuitous sign of the Spirit, a distinctive mark of their religious experience.¹⁷ As I have tried to discern the common threads of these spiritual insights and their place within contemporary American culture, I propose six themes of religious experience that emerge out of conversation with undocumented immigrants along the US/Mexican border.

4. Six Themes of Religious Experience of Undocumented Mexican-Americans along the US/Mexican Border

I offer these six themes conscious of their limitations, wanting to avoid on the one hand a sentimental romanticism of the immigrant life on the one hand and a simplistic characterization of American culture on the other. To be clear, immigrants can be as selfish, greedy and fearful as any others; they can tend as much to the worst side of human nature as the most noble; they are as capable of concealing God's presence as revealing it. What makes their religious experience unique is that it embodies Christ's presence in a unique way. Matthew 25:31-46 is not only a story of the last judgment but also a cryptic summary of the journey of the immigrant. Hungry in their homelands, thirsty in the crossing the desert, estranged in the United States, naked after being robbed at gunpoint by bandito gangs, sick in hospitals, and imprisoned in detention centers, they reveal a distinctive manifestation of Christ crucified and risen. In this analysis, I choose to focus on those specific narratives of luminous insight that function like contemporary parables. They not only tell a story of a particular immigrant but they invert an existing world view in the modern world. In particular, these immigrants defy some of the unchallenged assumptions and tendencies of contemporary culture and refocus them in light of the kingdom of God.

17. 1 Cor 1:25.

A Spirit of Dependence on God in a Self-Sufficient Society

One of the most striking dimensions of the lives of immigrants along the Mexican-American Border is their unabashed, unquestioned dependence on God. Being pushed to look death in the face in their dangerous trek across the border, they often learn that God is the only one in whom they can entrust their lives and the only one who can help them overcome such incredible adversity. The stories that emerge from their poverty challenge some of our prized notions of independence and self-sufficiency. Many migrants do not hesitate in saying that God is all they have and their faith is the one thing they possess after everything has been taken away. They often find hope in God in a seemingly hopeless situation.

One immigrant named Manuel is but one example. I met him along the side of a road after he had walked four days in the desert. His friends abandoned him when he could not keep up with the group, and he was forced to wander aimlessly for days, until he finally ran out of food and water. "After everything was taken away," he said, "I realized something I didn't know before. I understood that the only friend I truly have is God, that God is the one friend who I believe will never abandon me." His sense of poverty came through not only in his understanding of his socio-economic condition but also in his existential poverty and human need before God. His insight not only named something that was particular to his own experience, but I ask whether he also named a fundamental human poverty before God that is more universal, that is more part of every human heart, even when we have creative ways of masking this human vulnerability and pretending otherwise. Not only do immigrants like Manuel name that vulnerability but they manifest faith and courage in facing it, struggling with it and even overcoming it through faith and trust in God.

A Spirit of Gratitude in a Nation of Greed

Migrants also challenge some other deeply held notions of progress and prosperity in contemporary US/American culture. While there have been notable gains in contemporary society, Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* brings out how such progress must not be measured solely in terms of economic and technological advances but in terms of fostering full human, cultural, social and spiritual potential. In many ways, American culture has often become more a Pelagian meritocracy than a democracy;

it has become a place where effort and the reward of economic progress becomes the measure of human dignity. In this light, progress becomes something which is more earned than granted. As a consequence, even salvation has become a prize to be won rather than a gift to be received. Such thinking distorts the entirely gratuitous notion of redemption, which is offered and accepted as a free gift.

At the heart of the religious experience of migrants is the sense of the gratuity of God, a realization that everything comes from God, that all is borne and received as a gift. One of the things that migrants bring to our reflection on religious experience is a sense of the primacy of life, of how, prior to any possession, accomplishment or even spiritual experience, life itself is a gift. Many immigrants like Maria in the beginning of the paper bring out a capacity to see God where many would only see suffering and despair, to find God in the most unsuspecting places. Even with all its trials, one of the most remarkable things I find in the religious experience of immigrants is to praise God, even amidst their sufferings and trials.

A Spirit of Sacrifice in a Self-Fulfillment Culture

One of the key values of contemporary US/American culture is the notion of self-fulfillment, a notion that the goal of life is the satisfaction of all personal desires. While there is something human in the search to satisfy one's desires, taken to extremes this searching can degenerate into its own form of idolatry. Without a horizon of the sacred in one's life, need satisfaction becomes an endless abyss of want. Even a cursory look at inflated salaries of professional athletes or corporate executives (which can exceed \$50 million a year) leads us to ask whether what is labeled as economic progress is in fact a spiritual regress, not only in terms of the individuals that earn such salaries but the systems that endorse it. The spiritual lives of many undocumented immigrants – who lack any significant share in the world's resources, yet still manifest a capacity to thank God and celebrate life, and even find joy in the midst of the difficulties – challenge many of us to redefine life not in terms of what we have but in terms of who we belong to. The ontology of the immigrant is measured more in terms of what they do for others than what they possess for themselves. More than a desire for fulfillment, what comes through in immigrant narratives is a spirit of sacrifice for the sake of others. They are willing to undergo the incredible trials of the desert not for their own self-actualization but

in order to help their own families survive. As one immigrant named Miguel said,

Sometimes my kids come to me and say, 'Daddy, I'm hungry'. And I don't have enough money to buy them food. And I can't tell them I don't have any money, but we don't. I can barely put bean, potatoes and tortillas on the table with what I make. Nothing feels worse than having your hungry child look you in the eyes, knowing you don't have enough to give them. The reason why I'm migrating is because my family is hungry.

Rather than simply breaking civil law by crossing borders illegally, immigrants like Miguel are obeying some of the more fundamental laws of human nature, particularly the law of providing for their own families, of sacrificing their lives for the sake of others. Is this not the most distinctive characteristic of the followers of Jesus, of denying oneself and taking up one's cross for the good of others? (Matt 16:24).

A Spirit of Solidarity in a Country of Individualism

In the migrant experience, we also see an incredible spirit of solidarity, which is an incredible witness in a culture that seems to be fragmenting through its own individualism and even more so since the events of September 11. While much of the American spirit runs the risk of degenerating through a shallow sense of nationalism or even through the fear of losing its own place as a world power, many stories of immigrants along the border reveal yet a different way of living and moving in the world. I remember, in particular, an immigrant named Roberto. He was traveling through the desert by himself for two days, and he passed by a mesquite tree and heard some howling. Thinking he heard a stranded animal in the trees, he looked over and saw a young, twelve year old girl. She had gotten separated from her group, and she was stranded in the middle of the desert, literally a few days walk from any civilization. He had to make an important decision: either try to bring this child to safety or walk alone in search of his own freedom. He decided to stay with her, and they walked for two days across the desert until help came, even though it was a border patrol agent. What was remarkable here was the deep sense of solidarity, of human care and commitment that immigrants are capable of manifesting to each other, of one person who valued more the survival of another than even his own freedom. The migrants often reveal heroic sacrifices they make for each other in the name of a common solidarity, even while the United States continues to isolate itself through a dehumanizing privatism that degenerates into a deadly narcissism.

A Spirit of Risk among an Increasingly Complacent and Fearful People

Solidarity is not without its risks. Solidarity, in fact, entails risks, of health, of imprisonment, even of one's life. The migrants know many of the risks in front of them, and yet they still take them. In contrast, much of the American mentality is moving in a solitary direction. Especially since 9/11, many Americans run the risk of buying into a political illusion that our deepest security is anywhere but in God alone. The rationale for the recent Gulf war (or lack of) is a painful reminder of how far a country can go in making decisions out of fear, how leaders can be motivated to go to war not only out of the *reality* of weapons of mass destruction but *out of the fear* of weapons of mass destruction, even while none existed. Yet in America, the hypocrisy and double standards abound. Can we condemn a country for possessing weapons of mass destruction while at the same time possessing them ourselves, and, more to the point, can we condemn Israel for building a wall between Israel and Palestine but at the same time build one between Mexico and the United States? Such contradictions can only emerge out of a nation of fear, where it does not know how to identify itself except from on top. Perhaps those on the bottom have the most to teach us about what human life is before God; without a capacity to risk, without a willingness to give up idols of self-sufficiency and cultural efficiency, we run a greater risk of sacrificing our sense of inner-connectedness and common humanity. In some ways, the immigrant brings out a truth that all need to hear, a willingness to cross borders, to risk dangers even to oneself, even in the midst of one's fears. As some migrants say, "while it is difficult for us to enter *Los Estados Unidos*" (The United States), we do not understand because "*Estamos Unidos*" (We are United). Many of these immigrants bring out our inter-connectedness in ways that many others have failed to grasp.

A Way of Christ in a World of Globalization

In a time where we are often tempted to make God in our own image to suit our own needs and comforts, the immigrant continues to bring out the image of the crucified Christ in contemporary society. Especially in a globalized world where many people become wealthy at the expense of the poor, immigrants reveal an uncomfortable human brokenness that many of us would often rather avoid than face. In light of this, the plight of the undocumented immigrant challenges us not only to work for a globalization governed by economic factors but a globalization

based on the way of Christ. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops recently wrote in their pastoral letter, "Strangers No Longer," in this increasingly interconnected world we must work towards a "globalization of solidarity."¹⁸ At the current time the United States is distressingly "underdeveloped" in the regard.

The religious experience of the immigrant, in reality, is a contemporary way of the cross. Immigrants today experience an economic crucifixion in their poverty, a political crucifixion in their marginality, a legal crucifixion in their undocumented status, a cultural crucifixion in their displacement, and a social crucifixion in their separation from their families and loved ones, and, for the many who die, an actual crucifixion. They bring out the shadow side of globalization, not as some of its winners but as some of its victims. Yet they bear an inspiring capacity, in Paul's words, to "rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, and persevere in prayer" even amid such adversity.¹⁹ Immigrants and their rich human and religious experience have pushed me to realize that the task of the theologian is to engage the suffering of the world and from there discern the signs of the God of hope. Suffering is a crucial starting point for theological reflection and examining religious experience because it is from such misery that we can hear the voices of the crucified. From this perspective we discover, even in surprising ways, the elements of redemption that spontaneously emerge.²⁰ In listening to the religious experiences of those who are crucified today, like undocumented immigrants, we mysteriously enter into the revelation of God's love for us. It is also from here that we seek to discover a way of Christ in a globalized world.²¹

5. Conclusion

In summary, the religious experience of immigrants reveals a dependency on God that bears fruit in gratitude, a sacrifice for the sake of others that generates a true spirit of solidarity, and a willingness to risk one's own safety in order to welcome all people as brothers and sisters. In other

18. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Strangers No Longer*, <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranget.htm:10/22/2003>, no. 57.

19. Romans 12:12.

20. Matt 25:31-46.

21. This was also the challenge of the Vatican Council, which, in *Gaudium et Spes*, spoke about the joys and the hopes, the sufferings and anxieties of the people of this age. These sufferings are also those of the Church.

words, the religious experience of these immigrants brings out a presence of Christ that often gets lost or obscured in contemporary society.

I offer these themes as an initial reflection on how the immigrant poor enrich our understanding of God, knowing that this is but a first word on a theology of migration, and knowing that much more reflection needs to be done. In these brief and seminal thoughts, I propose that these immigrants also bring out something that is real for the journey of every Christian, who is called to go beyond borders of every sort – cultural, economic, social, ethnic and even intellectual. While many are indeed afraid of the undocumented Mexican immigrant in American society, we might reflect on the fact that it is not so much the Church that saves the immigrant but the immigrant who saves the Church.²² Their faith brings out contours of religious experience from the margin that often get lost or buried when one looks at life only from the centers of society.²³ Not only does the religious experience of Mexican immigrants help us understand the experience of crossing the US/Mexican border, but they also give us new insight into crossing new frontiers in theology, understanding religious experience, and seeing the revelation of a God through the eyes of those who are living the way of the cross in contemporary society.

22. I am grateful to Lyido Tomasi, CS for this insight.

23. For more on the way of the cross in contemporary society, see Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Way of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

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