

Mexican Immigration III

Father Richard Perozich, a missionary with the Maryknoll Fathers in Honduras, pointed out that television and politics more than returning emigrants have been corrupting Latin American cultures. The poor in Honduras, he said, "may not have a telephone or car, but they have cable TV," on which they can see attractive images of U.S. life. "Unfortunately," he said, "the evils of America are down here too -- the Barbara Boxer abortion movement, the practicing homosexual movement. Locals have told me that San Pedro Sula (where Perozich has worked for the past year) is the drug and AIDS capital of Central America."

"The televised images of American life," said Father Perozich, "lure Hondurans to the United States. It is a poor country. The poor abandon the countryside where most of the land is held by corporations, to come to work in maquiladoras (factories) in the city. These maquiladoras, though owned mostly by Hondurans, nevertheless keep wages very low in order to draw the U.S. contracts upon which they depend. Thus the poor seek higher wages and hope to escape dire poverty in the United States. "I see a general lack of hope among the really poor," said Perozich. "There is no social welfare to back up a loss of employment. Medical care is poor. The teachers in public schools go on strike often. Large numbers of kids are lucky if they get elementary education (grades one through six). This education leaves them with minimal job skills."

The middle class, too, come north because of a lack of steady work in Honduras. "We only have seven million people and cannot provide a living for all of them, the U.S. standard of living they see

on TV. We produce coffee, cattle, sugar, mine some minerals, but cannot take care of this whole nation which wishes to live a bit more like the rest of the world."

Father Perozich said the Honduran family is in poor shape, but not simply because of emigration. Both the fact that fathers go north for work and that many unwed women have children ("only 18 percent of all Honduran couples marry either civilly or in the Church," Perozich said) mean that "many families don't have fathers. Without one, the mother and children are vulnerable. She has to work. He may or may not send money back. Enough men begin a second family in the U.S.; thus, the one back home suffers more. Gangs are formed because fathers are not around."

Mark Zwick of the Casa Juan Diego Catholic Worker in Houston said "They are not coming here to become rich." Often foreign owned, maquiladoras have undermined traditional economies in Latin America, which, said Zwick, were "farm communities, with extended families and people working together." Often the poor in Latin America have work in the maquiladoras as their only choice; there they "can get \$50 a week," and "food on the Mexican side is more expensive than on the U.S. side," Zwick noted.

Zwick agreed that emigration is a major source of family disintegration in Latin America and that it often leads to bigamy. "And this is the reason that we at Casa Juan Diego oppose immigration," said Zwick.

Despite the dangers listed previously, and the warnings given concerning emigration, Pope St. John XXIII wrote in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of a right to emigrate "when there are just reasons in favor of it," since the fact that one "is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, worldwide fellowship of man." Talk of worldwide fellowship or citizenship sounds like the document in Vatican II called *Gaudium et Spes*; hopeful to the point of being naive. In *Laborem Exercens*, Pope St. John Paul II was closer to the mark I think, when he noted that "even if emigration is in some aspects an evil, in certain circumstances it is, as the phrase goes, a necessary evil."

This last comment seems accurate to me. There are times when someone needs to head for the hills, even if the hills are in another country.

But with that being said, in a series of interviews of various priests and lay workers, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times wanted to know if they thought that the moral and religious dangers outlined in 1920 are still relevant today. For example, does emigration harm the family? "Yes," said one Los Angeles archdiocesan priest (his name wasn't given). "I deal with it in confession all the time. Young guys who come over here who want to earn a living; they have good motives, they want to send money home because their families are economically disadvantaged. If they've just arrived, they're terribly depressed, crying; they miss their wives and children, they feel terribly guilty -- but that all fades. And eventually a lot of younger ones, especially, have to live in houses and apartments with a

whole bunch of other men. They begin drinking, they get into drugs, they get to the women. It's a mess. Before you know it, they've set up another family, and the old family's forgotten. That happens all the time."

So even if an immigrant heads for the hills of Los Angeles as a necessary evil (let's say for a good intention), he could find himself in a far worse situation than he left -- far worse for his soul that is -- and far worse for his family.

Another archdiocesan priest (also not named), agreed that family disintegration among immigrants' families "is a big concern." Not only men, but women, who leave their children in Mexico, cross the border, and "they're working here and living alone, and then, of course, all the things that that leads to -- marital infidelity, and all the rest." And even bigamy? "Oh, sure, definitely," said the priest. "Not uncommon." Though they take on another "spouse," immigrants do not necessarily abandon their families in Latin America. "It's a double life type of thing," he said. "It's not uncommon -- you even have men with two wives here in the United States."

Part of this problem is of course what is called "machismo" south of the border -- but the moral influences in the United States must be acknowledged. Television was bad enough, but now with the Internet and the various social medias, the problems are compounded. The culture shock is surely not reduced by watching poorly dubbed U.S. soap operas in Mexico.

It's not just Mexico that experiences the lures and traps of materialistic culture.