

## Welcoming the Stranger

Ernesto Cortes, Jr.

Normally when I speak to people about immigration issues, I have to caution them that its not enough to wait for Washington D.C. to act, that there is work to be done locally, regionally, and at the state level as well. It hardly seems necessary to caution you about that today. Washington D.C. is so distracted by the financial crisis and the downturn in the economy more generally that there is very little chance of any meaningful immigration reform at the federal level over the next two years.

I would like to encourage you to consider seriously the depth of the rising nativist sentiment of the last few years and the potential long-term consequences it has for our country. We can change the immigration laws (and we should), but new legislation will not be enough to change the hearts and minds and habits and practices of ordinary people who have been infected by racist, nativist sentiment. There are obviously legal dimensions to the immigration issue, just as there were legal dimensions to segregation and voting rights during the Civil Rights movement, but the redemption that is necessary will not happen without sincere, genuine engagement that crosses lines of race, economics, ethnicity, and country of origin.

And unfortunately we can expect that left to its own devices, nativist sentiment will continue to rise as the economy becomes more volatile. Yet the economic crisis is not likely to deter potential immigrants from crossing our borders for a number of reasons. First, as Benjamin Friedman reminds us in his book *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, throughout history slow economic growth in the United States has not made America less attractive to immigrants, because relative to the situations in their home countries, the U.S. remains an economic, political and social magnet.

And in fact, in the short run we may actually see an increase in the pressure on the U.S.-Mexico border because of two factors. First is the misery and suffering that will be caused in Mexico by the recession in the United States and around the globe. Second is

the “drug war” imposed on Mexico by the United States, the cost of which is going to be borne disproportionately by the Mexican society and its people.

Rather than focusing on reducing demand for drugs in the United States, our government has pressured Mexico to take on the drug cartels internally. And at the same time that our government is encouraging Mexico to pursue this war, both the U.S. and international financial institutions are pressuring the Mexicans to reduce government expenditures over all. An awful result of this is that the few important criminals who do get arrested don't get indicted, don't go to trial, don't get convicted, and don't go to jail. And if by some miracle they are forced through the judicial process and end up in prison, corruption in the prison system means they continue to run their trafficking networks from inside.

I spent a few weeks in Mexico in August, and I can tell you that literally every day there is another story in the paper about people being killed in the violence associated with what is rapidly emerging as a civil war. More than 150,000 Mexicans marched in the Zocalo in Mexico City while I was there, protesting against the rising violence. And that was only one of the many large demonstrations taking place across the nation. In the past people fled Mexico for the United States because of economic reasons, today given the enormous increase in violent crime and drug use, people are at least as likely to be fleeing for their lives and the lives of their families.

Some magazines and newspapers, both inside and outside of Mexico, are now talking about this war on drugs as "Calderon's Iraq". These are the arguments: first, President Calderon does not have enough "troops on the ground" to win this war; second, nobody seems to understand how deeply integrated is the drug trafficking business in the local economies and political networks, resulting in a tougher and bloodier opposition than expected; third, the army is being exposed to corruption, which will create much bigger problems; fourth, there is no "exit strategy"; and fifth, there have been alarming reports that the limited reduction of drug flow into the US, as a result of this effort, is causing an

increase in the use of drugs in Mexico – the drugs will be sold and consumed, critics say, either on one side of the border or the other.

Now, we cannot deny that the economic relationship between the US and Mexico represents a great opportunity for development, but at the same time this increased interdependence of our economies also represents a great challenge for both countries. In our quest to increase the export market for U.S.-grown food and U.S.-made products, Mexico has become one of our most important trading partners. Since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, the United States' gross domestic product (GDP) has grown by more than 50%. Just in the last year, despite the difficulties in our economy, two-thirds of all our economic growth came from exports, of which Canada and Mexico purchased a third. 55% of Mexico's imports come from the United States and Canada. Approximately 90% of Mexico's foreign trade is tied to the U.S. market in some fashion.

Meanwhile remittances from Mexicans working in the U.S. to their families in Mexico have grown to represent the second largest source of foreign exchange for the nation, exceeded only by oil exports. As the U.S. economy has weakened, remittances have decreased significantly (409 million fewer dollars sent back in the first half of 2008), which in turn means Mexicans have fewer dollars to purchase U.S. trade goods. This economic decline affects our financial institutions as well, both in terms of fees charged for the remittance transactions and in terms of the lines of credit many of our institutions have extended in Mexico and Latin America. Or, as people used to say, when the United States gets a cold, Mexico and Latin America get pneumonia.

Of course as I noted a minute ago, we have in essence created these problems for ourselves in that the United States chose to pursue a trade agreement rather than a common market strategy. And as a part of that trade agreement, we insisted that Mexico eliminate its subsidies for growing corn and other agricultural products (most recently adding chickens to the list), so that American farmers would have a new export market while still maintaining government subsidies of their own. The conditions imposed on Mexico by the U.S. forced farmers into the cities to look for work, which in turn

depressed wages in the urban areas at the same time that food prices were on the rise. It should come as no surprise that these pressures left many poor Mexican nationals with few options beyond seeking work across the border.

And the investments in infrastructure which were supposed to flow freely into Mexico with the reduction of the barriers to moving capital across borders never materialized, leaving NAFTA's promise for Mexico's economic growth unrealized.

Over the long run, as we emerge from our current economic crisis, it would be important for the United States to take a page out of our own experience in promoting the Marshall Plan and its ability to jump start the creation of the European Economic Union and the Strategic Investment Fund, which have transformed the economies of southern Europe and Ireland. These communities have become first world nations as a result, and are capable of competing successfully in the global economy.

When the European nations decided to link their economies more closely to one another, they deliberately chose a common market strategy rather than a trade agreement. They recognized the disparities between their various countries, and created a huge social investment fund to build up the infrastructure in poorer countries, as well as creating common labor standards. While the European Union's policy decisions have by no means completely eliminated economic tensions, or tensions related to immigration, they appear to represent a more practical approach than that of the United States to date.

Whatever lessons we can learn from our experiences with the Marshall Plan and the European Union, even in the short-run the fate of Mexico has to be on our front burner, both economically and politically. We are at this point in history, inextricably linked.

It is particularly frustrating to me that instead of engaging Mexico in a potentially much more productive relationship, we are in fact building barriers between our nations. The United States is spending \$7 million per mile for a wall that will eventually have to be torn down. This is money that could be spent to educate our children, build a first class

workforce, strengthen our nation's crumbling infrastructure, or provide health care to our most vulnerable. I'd like to tell our next president what Ronald Reagan told Mikhail Gorbachev: Mr. President – Tear down that wall!

There are countless myths about the costs of immigrants – both documented and undocumented. Most are easily refuted, however I think it is important to address a few specifically. First is the notion that immigrants drive down wages for native workers. I have no quarrel with the claim that employers have been successful in reducing the real wages of workers, but those declines are due not to immigrants but to changes in technology and the rise of globalization. As Simon Head cites in *The New York Review of Books*, "...since 1995, the year when the "new economy" based on information technology began to take off, incomes have not kept up with productivity, and during the past five years the two have spectacularly diverged."<sup>i</sup> He goes on to note that between 1995 and 2006, productivity grew 340 percent more than real wages – 779 percent in the last five years alone.<sup>ii</sup>

Second is the myth that immigrants take jobs from native workers. Even if the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrant workers were somehow miraculously located, detained and deported, the shock to the economy and the day-to-day functioning of the market would be tremendous. Operating on the assumption that every unemployed person in the United States would be in the right location, have the right skill set and the right frame of mind to replace the deported workers, we would still come up short. As of September 2008 the Bureau of Labor Statistics recognized only 9.5 million unemployed workers who were actively seeking employment.<sup>iii</sup> While this number does represent an increase of 2.2 million unemployed workers in the last twelve months, it demonstrates that even in times of economic crisis, we still need immigrants to fill jobs in our labor market.

While it is generally agreed that immigrants contribute to the downward pressure on wages of high-school drop-outs, only 20% of the incidence is attributable to the availability of immigrant labor; the remaining 80% is directly related to the substitution

of capital for labor. Studies also indicate that while immigrants lowered the wages of high-school drop-outs by 1 percent, they increased the wages of workers who had graduated from high school (92 percent of the workforce) by as much as 3 to 4 percent.<sup>iv</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that the competition for jobs held by undocumented immigrants largely impacts our most poorly educated segment of the native labor market would also seem to indicate that a closer examination of our educational policies is in order. Surely one way to address the concern would be to ensure that fewer people drop out of high school, thereby making them eligible for higher-skilled jobs which pay better wages.

The question of education policy is central to the immigration debate from yet another angle. The United States economy is going to lose hundreds of thousands if not millions of its most highly-skilled workers to retirement over the next two decades. If we expect to be able to meet the coming demand for a skilled workforce and continue our pace of economic growth as a nation, it is in our interest to invest in educating all our five year olds, regardless of whether or not their parents have papers.

The debate over immigration reform in the United States must be linked to a broader discussion about economic, education and trade policies. To consider the former in isolation from the latter is not only impractical, it denies the role that U.S. policy-making has played to date in driving up the numbers of people immigrating to the United States outside the legal process.

From perhaps a less immediate viewpoint, our stance on immigration also affects who we are as a nation, and who we say we are. The story of our country is one of immigration and migration (both voluntary and involuntary), whether it's the story of immigrants from Europe or of settlers illegally migrating from the southeastern United States into the Tejas y Coahuila state of Mexico. (For a different perspective on the problem of illegal immigration between the U.S. and Mexico, you might find it amusing to read the chapter entitled "The Problem with Texas" in Timothy Henderson's book *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and its War with the United States*.) As Benjamin Freidman reminds us, when

Alexis de Toqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, about one in ten Americans were foreign-born, nearly the same as the foreign-born fraction of the nation today.

As Amy Chua points out in her book *Day of Empire*, more than 95% of Americans today descend from someone who was an immigrant. Her thesis is that for all their differences, the one thing all successful world powers have had in common is an enormous pluralism and strategic tolerance for their time in history. She cites the rise of the United States' global power as a direct consequence of our ability to *continue* attracting, rewarding, and absorbing the energy and ingenuity of vastly diverse groups.

Thus the other part of our story as a nation of immigrants is innovation – multiple ways of looking at the same reality, and as a result finding useful ways of implementing new ideas, processes, and techniques. Innovators do not just discover or invent new things; they find creative ways to implement them. To the extent that a nation's culture encourages innovation and building on new ideas, those ideas are not only sustained over time, but actually develop a cumulative impact. Fareed Zakaria refers to this concept as social learning in his book *The Post-American World*. In his analysis, the key to social learning is that discoveries once made are not forgotten or limited in use, but are refined and developed over time into further new innovations.

It was immigrants who brought the most advanced textile technology to the United States from Britain in the nineteenth century. More than two centuries of immigration later, an immigrant invented the world's first commercially practical integrated circuit – the silicon semiconductor. Then other innovators, many of whom were also immigrants, took the concepts and ideas surrounding the silicon semiconductor and built an entirely new industry in the United States. This seems to me to be clearly an example of Zakaria's social learning. And of the thousands of engineering and technology companies started in Silicon Valley in the last decade, 52.4% had at least one key founder who was an immigrant.

Immigrants bring new energy and innovation to the United States. They are tremendously entrepreneurial and willing to take risks. After all, they've undertaken enormous risk just to get here.

Furthermore, if we deny the immigrant aspect of our story as a nation, we cut ourselves off from a large part of the energy and imagination which led to the promise of Democracy. To develop the story of America we created an institution to teach the habits and practices of a democratic culture – the public schools. As far back as the 1830s free public education has been promoted as a “crucible of democracy, a blending of all children to function from a common set of values.” Only if education is about teaching people – particularly young people – to understand other perspectives and points of view while maintaining the ability to debate and argue their own can we hope to sustain democracy in the face of the growing isolationism, cynicism and polarization not just in our own nation, but in the global community.

To cut ourselves off from the immigrant or the stranger is to cut ourselves off from the source of our own faith traditions. The story of the stranger comes out of the Exodus. In chapter 19 of Leviticus we are told:

You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the Land of Egypt.

Israel's very identity is of the Immigrant as Foundress. It is Ruth who says to Naomi: whether thou goest I will go; your people shall be my people; your God will be my God.

In the genealogy of Christ in Matthew's Gospel there are four uppity women who are Strangers: Ruth, an immigrant from Moab; Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law; Rahab, prostitute of Jericho; and Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite and an adulteress. All of these women are depicted as foreign and/or disreputable to indicate the importance of

disruption in the formation of Israel's identity and the shaping of the Covenantal tradition.

Both Eucharistic and Covenantal communities in the Catholic tradition presuppose the existence of a similar mixed multitude which draws us out of our narrow space – our Egypt – so that we are challenged to engage and understand the world of the Other. This engagement opens us to God's spirit as we begin to practice the virtue of *hesed*, the ability to put yourself in the other person's situation and embrace their context and their reality.

In humanity there has always an inclination to create monuments to one culture or one faith. The rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and Russia; the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States; the English-only movement today.

But our faith tradition calls us to reach out to the Stranger, to be able to befriend those who are other – not part of our tribe. God is not just a noun, but a verb. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that God is pure act. And Nicholas Lash reminds us that there is no distinction between what God is and what God does. The more we reflect God's divinity in our actions, the more human we become. If we are truly made in God's image, then we are called to act – to welcome the stranger.

The difficulty is that we fear the Other. Even before the beginning of the American-initiated "war on terror" and the looming recession, the alienating and homogenizing effects of globalization and the dominant market culture had begun to isolate people from one another and their institutions, creating a new kind of tribalism.

The only way to combat this trend, to become more human through reflection and conversational reciprocity, is for institutions – and when I say institutions I mean particularly churches, parishes, congregations, synagogues, mosques and temples, as well as schools and other community institutions – these institutions must take action. Inside the safety of our institutions we can learn to make ourselves calculatedly vulnerable to

the Other in a way that is prudent rather than stupid, public rather than private, and is centered around the experiences of our families and communities.

The difficulty is that we don't really know how to do that. At best we only know how to make polite conversation, to chit chat. In my experience in organizing with the Industrial Areas Foundation, this is one of the hardest things to teach – how to have real conversations with one another. When we do congregational development almost inevitably one of the biggest topics, one of the most difficult issues, is to teach people how to have genuine conversations that include real listening and reflection. And for these conversations to be meaningful, they have to lead to action – because insight never liberated anyone. When people learn to act collaboratively on issues they have identified as important to their families and neighborhoods, they come to see their interests as being connected to the interests of those they had thought of as Stranger or Other.

I think those of you who have worked with IAF organizations can testify – both to how difficult this work is, but also how valuable it can be. If we don't equip the people in our parishes and other institutions with the tools to do something – to engage one another and take action – all our good intentions will lead to nowhere.

Unfortunately there will always be a group that is identified as the Outcast – whether its immigrants, African-Americans, or whoever the next target is. And to the extent that we don't teach people to develop the habits, practices and capacities for genuine engagement, conversation and action we are not fulfilling the call of our faith tradition.

In Matthew 25 we read the words “I was a stranger and you took me in.” The phrase “to take in” comes from the Greek term *synago*, which means making someone a member of the community. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism the synagogue was the center of community life. It was not just a house of worship, but the place where all important decisions were made. One of the Hebrew synonyms for synagogue is *bet ha-kneset*, or house of assembly. Today the Kneset is the parliament of Israel. Thus to be taken into the synagogue

community meant to be included in the center of political and economic life; it represented a commitment to a shared prosperity in which everyone participates.

Our democratic tradition teaches us that to be included in the center of political and economic life requires engagement in civil society and public debate. To my mind, both our democratic tradition and our faith traditions point us in the direction of theologian Robert Sokolowski. According to Sokolowski:

All discourse is in principle a matter of conversational reciprocity. Thinking in the medium of words is inherently public and so is human reason.

What I think Sokolowski is saying is that conversational reciprocity enables us to become more human. But that kind of reciprocity presupposes reflection, and the ability to be truly reflective is dependent on being in relationship with the Other – those who are not a part of our tribe.

David Tracey reminds us in *Plurality and Ambiguity* that:

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the Other says, however different or Other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, and to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.

Or as Bernard Lonergan put it: Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.

One of the roles of the Church in public life must be to teach people to have the conversations that build relationships which cross lines of race, class, ethnicity, economics, country of origin, and even religion. This is the reason we build our broad-based organizations with as much diversity as possible. Our organizations include

congregations and temples of faith as well as secular institutions such as unions, schools, and community institutions. We actively seek to include predominantly African-American, Hispanic, Anglo, Asian institutions as well as those that are multi-ethnic in their own right. The organizations include people from both middle class and low income communities, and in some cases even relatively wealthy families and their institutions.

Now when I first started organizing, frankly I thought about the work in terms of taking resources away from the greedy wealthy “haves” who had practically (and in some cases literally) stolen them, and getting those resources to the have-nots. But as the world has changed over the last 35 years, it has become clear to me that the work today has to be much more about reweaving the increasingly frayed fabric of society. And that fabric is frayed both inside and between wealthy neighborhoods and institutions, poor neighborhoods and institutions, middle class neighborhoods and institutions, and both within and among ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

Now my work, the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation has always been about organizing people around their interests rather than their fears and anxieties. This has always been difficult, but it has never been a more daunting task than it seems today. In times of economic crisis people are even more likely to operate out of their fears and anxieties – and people who are fearful and anxious tend to start looking for scapegoats. We have to be out in front, ahead of the curve, working to teach people that not only is there no reason to fear those who are different – but to actively seek to engage the Other, to form relationships and move into collaborative action around their shared interests.

If you want people to engage fully in the life of their parish, of their community, then you have to offer them something that leads toward worship, and enables worship, through God’s grace, to comfort us in the acceptance of our vulnerabilities and creaturehood and to disrupt us to be more human, more engaged and more relational with both our neighbor and the Other.

Now with the help of people like yourselves, the leaders of the Texas IAF organizations have worked together to provide water and sewer services for hundreds of thousands of families who didn't have them, to build workforce development strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and to dramatically improve the education and health care available for our children. Obviously we need to do much more in these troubled times, and that's why we need your help – not just in Texas, but around the nation.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to be with you today, and I hope to be able to have many conversations with you about the future of our families and our communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Simon Head, "They're Micromanaging Your Every Move," *The New York Times Review of Books*, Volume 54, Number 13, August 16, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Average Hourly Earnings, 1982 Dollars, Production and Nonsupervisory Workers, 1995-2006; Major Sector Productivity and Costs Index: Output, All Persons, 1995-2006.

<sup>iii</sup> "Unemployment", *Employment Situation Summary, September 2008*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, released October 3, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Phillipe Legrain, p. 142.

### **Ernesto Cortes, Jr.**

Ernesto Cortes, Jr. is the Co-Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a non-profit organization founded in Chicago by the late Saul Alinsky. Cortes' affiliation with the IAF officially began in 1972 when he attended the organization's organizer training institute in Chicago. After training, Cortes worked with IAF leaders in Wisconsin and Indiana for a year developing his skills as a community organizer. In 1974 Cortes moved to San Antonio, his native city, where he founded Communities Organized for Public Service, COPS, the well-known and highly effective church-based grassroots organization. In the following years Cortes helped found other community-based organizations in cities throughout Texas and the southwest. Together with COPS these organizations became what is now called the Southwest IAF Network. Under Cortes' supervision, the organizations of the network have developed successful initiatives in the areas of job training, economic development, citizenship and education. Cortes has received numerous awards and fellowships for his work, including most recently the H. J. Heinz Award for Public Policy and an appointment as a Martin Luther King Visiting Professor at MIT in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.