

Jennie Weller  
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Beyond the Border:  
An Essay on Cultivating a Shared Vision of Common Good

*“Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say the good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all.”*

—Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

The issue of immigration, especially with regard to the mounting tensions at the border between the U.S. and México, is one that shapes the political, social, and economic atmosphere in this country. Because, above any characterization of it as a subject of labor or national security, immigration is fundamentally a *human* issue, it affects nearly every aspect of human life from education, health care, and the labor market to law enforcement, social services, and the Church. In this sense, immigration stands out as one of the more complex issues we will face in this century, the remedy for which there is no one, clear policy, program or treaty. Even so, an immigration reform capable of effectively transforming immigration policies and laws and redefining public discourse and cultural perceptions on immigration is on the horizon. Evidence for this forward-movement is found in the apparent orientation of multiple crucial players the Immigration debate toward a distinct perceived notion common good.

In this essay, I endeavor first to explore the notion of the common good and to subsequently delineate the separate visions of the common good which characterize the political, social, and economic dimensions of the immigration issue in the U.S. Drawing upon the wisdom of Catholic social teaching, I will then point out the elements of this doctrine which are essential to a holistic sense of the common good, which are also precisely the concepts which are found absent in political, social, and economic representations of immigration. Lastly, from my own

experience at the border, I will offer insights into the cultivation of a shared vision of the common good with regard to immigration.

The Catholic Church sees common good as the sum total of the social conditions that enable individual people and groups to more fully and readily reach human fulfillment through the just ordering of society. The three main dimensions of the immigration issue, in their orientation towards a perceived notion of the common good, fall short of this ideal. Although it may be pragmatic to imagine a spiritual element entering into each of these dimensions, it is significant to recognize the ways in which Catholic social teaching holds within it the capacity to engage and inform prevalent misguided notions of the common good so as to bring about shared resolution.

While immigration issues have sporadically surfaced in political dialogue over the past twenty years or so, the topic has shaped the political atmosphere in this country in a profound way in recent years as well as in the recent presidential campaign. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 marked the beginning of a surge in public discourse on Immigration. In years since, several attempts at reform have been made leading up to the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007. Coupling tough border enforcement measures and a crackdown on employers of illegal immigrants with a pathway to citizenship for 12 million illegal immigrants, a new guest-worker system for foreigners seeking entry and dramatic changes to the system of legal migration, the 761-page bill would have been the most dramatic overhaul of the nation's immigration laws but was defeated in the Senate. As is common at such a high level of the government, the highly complex issue of immigration became overly politicized and severely polarized. Despite attempts at bipartisan compromise, the powerful forces of the political left and right drown the intended reforms in a current of unceasing debate. Even if opponents and proponents had reached middle

ground, the notion that the government's idea of the common good functions as such for all those under its administration is troubling.

Globalization puts more and more decisions in the hands of the bureaucracy. But the Church's position on acquiring the common good involves moving beyond top-down government initiatives and mobilizing all levels of society. True change is often not brought about through entities which are dominant in the social hierarchy, but rather through the involvement of all people in the creation of a new social order based on the principles of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity means that "the exercise of power should be made by the smallest possible and most local units of society" (Groody 115). Due to corruption, greed, and partisanship, it is clear that the highest structures of power do not conform to an adequate notion of the common good. Just as the primary function of the government is to protect the rights of individuals, individuals must be able to then contribute to the progress, health, well-being of the human community.

The defeat of the 2007 Immigration Bill also represents a key element of the social dimension of the immigration debate in the U.S. In a *Washington Post* editorial published the day after the death of the bill, writer Jonathon Weisman claimed that the opponents of the bill painted the Senate fight as "a battle between U.S. citizens and a government that has grown insensitive to an illegal-immigrant invasion that threatens the nation's fabric." This remark begs the question: what comprises our nation's fabric? If one takes into consideration our dependence on low-wage minority workers and the simple truth that this land was originally and remains a nation of immigrants, it becomes apparent that ethnic diversity immigration brings is not only necessary to, but also the essence of the social and cultural fabric of America.

On the heels of every major restructuring period in American history, or any interval marked by deep economic transformation, the immigration issue has essentially taken on a new identity in terms of political classifications with implications on social perceptions. Throughout its existence, immigration has evolved from the domain of the Labor Department to that of Public Health and, from there, to the Justice Department, and then finally to the Department of Homeland Security. Since 2001, a fundamental shift has taken place regarding how the government, the media, and the general public view immigration. Instead of viewing it rightly as a human issue or at least a labor issue, the American public embraced nationalist propaganda and dehumanized the issue of immigration by closely relating it to the threat of terrorism. Subsequently, angry voices of venom, hate, and racism cried out against “illegal aliens” and in support of closed borders and the construction of fences. Anti-immigration sentiments of “They’re taking our jobs!” or “They’re a burden on social services!” infiltrated social perceptions of the migrant. From this social atmosphere, ideals of freedom, ownership, and privilege constructed a notion of the common good which encompassed not the benefit of all people but that of legal citizens alone.

In his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII wrote “to claim ones rights and ignore ones duties, or only half fulfill them, is like building a house with one hand and tearing it down with the other.”<sup>1</sup> This statement echoes the doctrine in Catholic social teaching which claims that freedom involves both rights and responsibilities. More than simply freedom to act according to one’s will, “freedom seeks to safeguard human dignity by protecting human beings against the burden of oppression and exploitation” (Groody 111). This notion of freedom expresses a truer vision of the common good which thwarts the destructive human tendency of

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<sup>1</sup> *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty, 1963.

“othering” and instead welcomes the orphan, the widow, and the stranger with love into the human community.

Aside from politics and social perceptions, the menagerie of issues at the U.S./México border also has vast implications in the realm of economics, for immigration policies and economic policies in this country are inextricably intertwined. Low-skilled, low-wage workers can, in some ways, can be viewed as the backbone of our economy in that they allow for cheap production of goods which sustains commercial and agricultural markets. Another current economic factor which ties into the topic of immigration is the illegal drug market in the United States, which is one of the most profitable in the world. An indicator of the associate of this trade with border issues is the substantial portion of México’s economy constituted by drug cartels. Drug trafficking is an estimated US\$50 billion a year business in México; the loss of this business would shrink its economy by an estimated 63 percent (Hazard).

There are many other economic points of concern in the immigration debate, including health care, social services, and education. But, in order to distinguish the notion of the common good which drives the economic approach to immigration, we will instead look at the role played by the U.S. in the passage of NAFTA as a prototype. A network of bankers, politicians, lobbyists, and corporate representatives comprised the intellectual power behind NAFTA. A main objective of the agreement was to ensure that México and other Latin American countries would have “the funds to increase their extension of credit substantially” (Fernandez-Kelly 4). In this sense, we (the lenders) wanted to guarantee that the Latin American countries (the borrowers) could service their debt to us. According to the former head of Chase Manhattan Bank, David Rockefeller, “[This] route is the most efficient and least expensive vehicle we have to protect our own self-interest in maintaining the creditworthiness of Latin America”

(Fernandez-Kelly 4). Although this “self-interest” seems to refer to America as a whole, it excludes labor unions, public interest organizations, and small business associations. Essentially, the statement about the common good that is made in this situation is “What is good for America’s banks is good for Americans.” México, in its involvement in the passage of NAFTA, also acquiesced to this idea that what is good for the wealthy few is good for all, as the two main Mexican proponents of the treaty were large commercial interests and young public officials who were similarly enamored with the prospects of free enterprise (Fernandez-Kelly 5).

In a pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. economy, U.S. Catholic bishops assert an opinion on the measure of “goodness” in economic decisions which is quite different from that of the proponents of NAFTA. In this letter, they write that any economic system ought to be judged by “what it does *for* and *to* people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the economy should serve people, not the other way around. This perception of the economy is rooted in an element of Catholic social teaching which upholds the dignity of the human person and provides a preferential option for the poor. This is a crucial element of envisioning the common good from an economic standpoint which has been and continues to be forgotten in economic interactions between the U.S. and Mexico. When migrant workers are considered from an economic standpoint, they are often stripped of their humanity and viewed as cogs in the grand machine. Our role in the passage of NAFTA and in many other aspects of immigration policy has demonstrated a vision of economic progress which serves the common good of the rich alone. From the perspective of Catholic social teaching, economic efficiency only has value in the context of communitarian and egalitarian values of an overarching vision of the common good.

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<sup>2</sup> *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986

The fragmented and distorted notions of the common good which arise from political, social, and economic dimensions of the immigration debate are troublesome. Inasmuch as they abandon concepts of subsidiarity, freedom as rights and responsibilities, and the dignity of the human person, they represent perspectives which are somewhat elevated or even isolated from the human reality at the border. Fortunately, one constant that I experienced at the ground level of involvement in immigration, in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, was the sense that everyone viewed their individual labor as being participatory in a greater, shared endeavor which truly embraced the human aspect of immigration.

The work of Father Peter and Sister Betty at the Tabor House in Juárez provides a perfect example of the principles of subsidiarity in action. Drawing upon Oscar Romero's charge to "come, accompany my people," these two faithful servants lived in community with the people who face the hardships of border life every day. Resisting tendencies to engage in cultural imperialism, they only participated in social projects initiated by the native people in the community. The directors of Sin Fronteras, recognized that freedom in this country involves rights and responsibilities. The right to earn a decent wage imposes the responsibility to try and reimburse the hundreds of thousands of *Braceros* who were cheated. The right to purchase produce at affordable prices imposes the responsibility to welcome, clothe, feed, and shelter farm workers. Lastly, Annunciation House typified the visualization of the common good as embracing the dignity of the human person. Welcoming in the stranger, the volunteers at A-House embody the spiritual principle that we all contribute to the progress of the human community. Whether they are acknowledged or not, the incorporating of the principles of Catholic Social teaching displayed in the work of activists, organizers, and humanitarians at the border reflects the right ordering of society toward the common good.

Exploring the ways in which the prevalent concepts of the common good in our country diverge from that which is truly beneficial to all members of the human community challenges us to acknowledge the disordered values of our society and their effect on our approach to the issue of immigration. Instead of envisioning our heavenly citizenship and recognizing the common bond of all of humanity, we more often shape our identity based on superficial notions of temporal allegiances, private property, legal status, and personal or even national rights without any social, moral, or divine reference point. However, when we consider the power of organization at lower levels of society to effect change, the significance of upholding the dignity of the human person in all decision-making, and the obligation to protect the rights of others as well as enjoying their own, we grow closer and closer to cultivating a truly holistic notion of the common good.

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