

Emigrate: A Call from God

Story & Photography by José Astúa

In a nation like ours we oftentimes forget that it has been forged by immigrants; Beginning with the first European settlers, many of whom were looking for a place where they could truly be free, to today, in which many others seek opportunities for growth that are impossible to find in their home countries.

Thousands of people venture to the United States in search of a better future. An unimaginable number of them do so knowing that they risk their lives during the journey. All this to arrive, as the scriptures say to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:17.) Once they arrive here, they face many other difficulties due to their immigration status; they are discriminated against and exploited by unscrupulous people who take advantage of them.

Much of the local community does not know who comes to work in our fields. Throughout the years in migrant ministry, we have met everyone from dental students to engineers and lawyers who come to the states to work the harvest. This is because it is more profitable for them to work as migrants than practice their professions in their home countries.

In the pastoral letter concerning migration by the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States titled *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* we are told that: “The Church in our two countries is constantly challenged to see the face of Christ, crucified and risen, in the stranger. The whole Church is challenged to live the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-25), as they are converted to be witnesses of the Risen Lord after they welcome him as a stranger.”

For decades, West Michigan has welcomed migrant workers who contribute their grain of sand to the growth of our nation by harvesting farm products summer after summer. Tubers, fruits, and legumes reach our tables thanks to the hands of workers who harvest them with their efforts. However, their lives full of joy and sadness like ours, remain anonymous, something that makes them vulnerable because on many occasions they are treated as second-class human beings, people without an identity, without a past or a future. That is why our bishop, David Walkowiak takes time each summer to make special visits and celebrate the Holy Eucharist with the migrant workers in our communities and with the parishes that serve them. Likewise, some of our parish



priests, together with their parish leaders, provide invaluable support to serve these brothers and sisters who are in need of feeling welcome and accompanied on their journey of faith. We are also joined annually by the presence of missionary priests who are invited by the diocese to support this important ministry for our Church.

Esteban

During one of our visits to the migrant camps near Lake Michigan we had the opportunity to meet Jesús Esteban who comes from a small town in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Esteban lived along with 4 other men in his small trailer home, each with a story to tell another time.

Esteban left his wife and 8-year-old daughter in search of a better future in the land of opportunity. He mentioned that prior to coming to the US, he worked at his mother's small restaurant. Esteban shared that he finished his law degree but due to the corruption in Mexico, it was impossible for him to practice his profession since he had to pay a substantial amount of money to do so. It would take many years to save the money necessary to begin his career as a lawyer, for this reason he decided to migrate to the United States. "Just 6 months ago I decided to come to the US, putting everything in God's hands. My plan is to stay here for 4 years and then return to my home country and pursue my career." he says. "Who wants to come here and leave their family? Nobody, nobody wants to do it." he shares simultaneously.

It took Esteban ten days to get to North Carolina, days in which he was not able to communicate with his family to inform them of what he was experiencing. During this time, he not only faced his own suffering but also that of many other people who made the same trip- men, children, and pregnant women with the hope that their children would be born in the land of abundance. People whom he saw only once in his life and, although he wanted to, he could not help since his future and that of his family depended on the success of his trip. Finally, when he arrived, he was able to talk to his wife to tell her about his difficult journey and how he entrusted himself to God and the Virgin of Guadalupe as he reached his destination.

God's promises are not just for a handful of people, we are all called. The story of Esteban, his family and of so many migrants who come to this country should remind us of the history of the people of Israel. Who, starting with Abraham, receive a direct call from God to leave their homeland (Gen 12:1-2) this call is not only to improve their lives and the lives of their loved ones but above all so that they become witnesses of the highest God, who works through them to bless all the nations of the Earth while turning us into a great nation called to holiness and dedication to Him.