

'We're brothers and sisters in Christ': For Encuentro Catholics, immigration is personal

DALLAS (CNA) - When Miriam Joyce of the Diocese of Raleigh talks about immigration, her face folds with concern.

Her worry is not for her own wellbeing; she is a United States citizen. But she worries for her friends - they come from El Salvador, they have children, and soon they may have to go back to a violent, unstable country.

"One of my friends has a daughter that is 19 years old, and they came here here with permission, and now with what's going on with the President now they have to leave by January 2019, in less than four months," Joyce told CNA.

Her friends once had Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which was granted to El Salvador in 2001, following a massive earthquake in the country. TPS is granted for countries who are experiencing an ongoing armed conflict, an environmental disaster, or "other extraordinary and temporary conditions that prevent people from safely returning home to the country."

In January 2018, the Department of Homeland Security terminated TPS status for El Salvador, Haiti, Sudan, and Nicaragua.

"They're always worrying that they're going to get a knock on the door and it's the government telling them it's time for you to leave."

Immigration is a tough topic no matter what the crowd. But when that crowd is the National V Encuentro, a gathering of Hispanic and Latino Catholics throughout the United States, the topic is undoubtedly emotional and incredibly personal. Many of the 3,000-some participants are immigrants. Or are related to some. Or are best friends with others.

Andrea Lerma tears up talking about her mother, who is still in Mexico. Although Lerma was born in the United States, she grew up in Mexico until she was 15 years old. She then moved to the U.S. to live with her uncles, whom she hadn't met.

To Latino immigrants, Lerma said she would encourage them to "keep fighting for what you want, and don't forget who you are, who your parents are, or where you come from, because that is going to help you to set up your goals," she said. "And pray, because sometimes we forget to pray. We forget to give thanks to God for another day."

Alejandra Brava, is a young adult immigrant from Vera Cruz, Mexico, is a DACA recipient who now lives in and works as the Hispanic youth and young adult minister for the Archdiocese of Denver.

DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is an Obama-era policy that protects undocumented immigrants who were brought into the United States as children. The program prevents DACA recipients, also known as "Dreamers," from being deported. It also provides work permits.

Brava said she was able to get a teaching job in the United States thanks to DACA, and it has allowed her to do what she loves.

“I am evidence that I’m not here to hurt someone,” Brava told CNA. “I’m here and I came to study and I just wanted to do something with my life, I love teaching and I love doing ministry.”

While President Donald Trump has sought to end DACA, there have been legislative efforts to maintain elements of DACA in an immigration law, and DACA recipients may still submit applications to renew their status.

Brava said she hoped other Catholics would see immigrants as their brother or sister in the faith. “We’re human beings, there’s no difference. Legal status doesn’t make a person less worthy,” she said.

Many immigrants from Central and South America who come to the United States are Catholic, and Hispanics make up more than 40 percent of Catholics within the U.S.

Because of this, immigrants often look to the Church for help once they arrive in the U.S.

Alfonso Lara is the Director of Hispanic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado. He said that parishes need to be intentional about welcoming immigrants, “not only with coffee and donuts but also having a committee to welcome them, realizing that they’re another human being coming to your country with a different experience of life and a different experience of the Church.”

He said he would encourage church leaders not to inquire about the legal status of immigrants, but to be “humans receiving humans.”

“We’re welcoming the stranger, that’s what we do,” he said. “When another person comes to church to have an encounter with Jesus, we need to respect that.”

Patricia Zapor is the director of communications for The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), which is a network of non-profit organizations that provide immigration legal services to their clients.

Zapor told CNA that there are many practical things that parishes can do to support and welcome immigrants in their parish.

“It could be something as simple as collecting money to help people pay the fees that go along with their applications,” she said. Depending on the form, that could be anywhere between hundreds or more than a thousand dollars, which doesn’t include the fingerprint and background check fees.

“They might offer (language classes), or they might host a know your rights event,” Zapor said. CLINIC has resources about the rights of immigrants available in nine languages.

Immigrants often are not sure where to get started in the application process, and there are a “fair amount” of fraudulent companies out there that try to offer immigration services to unwitting clients, so providing proper resources and information is key, Zapor noted.

If a parish really wanted to get involved, they could host a refugee family, Zapor said.

Or they could host something as simple as a rosary with immigration-themed reflections, or a Las Posadas celebration, or other simple ways “of getting a community to think about

immigrants and maybe have a conversation about them without being hammered over the head with the politics,” she said.

Ultimately, Catholics should acknowledge immigrants as fellow human beings who should be treated with care and respect, Brava said.

“We need to treat each other as brothers or sisters in Christ,” she said. “We have differences in culture, in ideas, in opinions, but at the end of the day, we believe in the same God. We need to value our neighbors, our brothers and sisters regardless of their status and immigration.”