News



Yakima, Washington, Bishop Joseph Tyson, second from left, poses with members of the regional dance troupe who took part in a "seranatas" celebration prior to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Dec. 12 feast day Mass at Holy Apostles Parish in East Wenatchee, Washington. (Courtesy of the Yakima Diocese)



by Dan Morris-Young

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 12, 2017

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When "political leaders at the highest level of the government generalize Mexican immigrants with harsh and prejudicial language, they destroy the very fabric of trust we need to address serious issues of public policy," declared the Bishop of Yakima, Washington, in a homily marking the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The homily was delivered to a half dozen parishes in different parts of the diocese, each home to significant numbers of agricultural workers, many of whom are from Mexico and have cloudy legal residential or labor status.

"You are chosen. You are chosen to live fully a profound human dignity that no political power and no social movement can ever destroy. You are chosen! You are chosen to build a basilica of faith!" Bishop Joseph Tyson told congregations at vigil Masses at Our Lady of Lourdes in Selah and St. Rose of Lima in Ephrata, and Dec. 12 feast day liturgies at Holy Apostles in East Wenatchee, St. Joseph in Wenatchee, Immaculate Conception in Mabton, and St. Paul Cathedral in Yakima.

In the Spanish-language homily, Tyson noted that Washington's $50 billion agricultural industry is the state's largest economic sector and much of it is supported by migratory labor.

"Families from rural Mexico often have long-standing ties with families here in Central Washington," Tyson said.

The bishop traced the history of the area's imported labor to World War II when "America sent an army to Europe" and "Mexico sent an army of workers — 'braceros' — here to the Yakima Valley to pick the fruit. Ever since, we have never had a local labor force sufficient to meet the demands of a growing and globalized agricultural industry."

"This is why it is morally wrong and reprehensible to blame either workers from Mexico or growers here in the valley for this situation," Tyson said. "The

responsibility for this situation lies clearly and directly with governmental leadership of both political parties unresponsive to the local conditions here in central Washington."

Build "basilicas of faith" and hope "that someday those in public office will catch on to what we already know from natural moral law: that our human dignity does not hinge on the whims of changing political fortune, but ultimately comes from a God who chooses to take on our humanity with all its sorrows, struggles and sufferings," he said.

Advertisement

Immigration issues are high-profile and contentious in the Yakima and Spokane dioceses of central and eastern Washington. The area is home to the bulk of the state's food and agriculture industry, much of it dependent on seasonal labor predominately made up of both documented and undocumented Latino immigrants.

Hispanic Catholics make up about three-fourths of the Yakima Diocese which encompasses seven counties. On any given Sunday, about 60 percent of the diocese attends a Spanish-language Mass.

Tyson was a key player in a nine-month effort that led to the issuing of a set of five principles for comprehensive U.S. immigration reform, released in August 2013 by a consortium of Washington state labor, business, religious and government leaders.

Those precepts endorse secure sovereign borders, underscore the human dignity of the undocumented, support the right "to find economic opportunities" in one's homeland but acknowledge a right to emigrate to secure a decent living, and declare "refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection."

Dialogue participants exchanged differing views and overcame "a highly politicized climate" to develop the shared ideals, Tyson said at the time.

During his multi-parish homily, the bishop conceded that "certainly there are real and legitimate concerns on the part of our civil authorities on border security, human trafficking, and the drug trade as well as gang violence."

These concerns, however, he charged, are too often distorted and "overlook the local reality here in the Yakima Valley."

Tyson urged worshipers to take comfort from the words "given to San Juan Diego by Our Lady at Tepeyac: 'I am truly your merciful Mother, yours and all the people who live united in this land and of all the other people of different ancestries, my lovers, who love me those who seek me, those who trust in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their complaints and heal all their sorrows, hardships and sufferings.' "

The bishop also asked attention to advice from an agnostic friend of Pope John Paul II, Vaclav Havel, expressed in a 1978 essay, "The Power of the Powerless."

According to Tyson, Havel "laid out a vision for combatting corruption and deadlocked political power that had gripped" his native Czechoslovakia.

"In a nutshell," Tyson explained, "Havel proposed that the way to overcome a corrupt and unresponsive political system was to create pockets and spaces of freedom — in our private homes, among our closest friends, and with trusted co-workers. In these spaces of freedom, we can live and express our deepest aspirations, our most profound desires, and our most firmly held beliefs — including our religious beliefs. These spaces of freedom would slowly erode the gridlock of corrupt politics."

"Friends, this is what we do tonight," he continued. "We are building a space of freedom. By hearing the command of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego as our own, we are building a basilica of faith. We are claiming our basic human dignity that cannot be limited by any lack of legal status and cannot be corrupted by a broken immigration system. We stand together this night in all of its wonder before the beauty the Blessed Virgin Mary as she appeared to San Juan Diego, conscious of the fact that she reflects the beauty and dignity of each of us — not only of our earthly humanity — but the eternal beauty of the soul God has given each and every one of us."

The Yakima liturgies were among a myriad Our Lady of Guadalupe feast day "prayer services, Masses, processions and other events" held in dioceses across the country "as the Catholic Church continues to accompany migrants and refugees seeking opportunity to provide for their families," according to a Dec. 7 press release from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The release quoted Bishop Joe Vásquez, of Austin, Texas, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Migration:

"As we enter the Advent season and Christmas approaches, we are reminded of the unique role and importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a unifier and peacebuilder for communities. We honor her role as protectress of families, including those families separated and far from home."

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email is dmyoung@ncronline.org