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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” (Luke 17:12).

Today the church commemorates St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917). The life of Mother Cabrini tells us something about the concern the church has always had for immigrants and refugees. She was born in Italy, founded a community of sisters, and was asked by Pope Leo XIII to relocate to the United States to care for Italian immigrants there. Stories of the struggle of immigrants and the squalor and prejudice facing the waves of new arrivals in cities like New York and Chicago had reached the ears of the pope, and he knew that women religious would be the most effective help he could send them.

Today’s Gospel invites us to reflect on a shameful reality within our American society and for the millions of people who have been relegated to the fate of lepers. These are the internal refugees and migrants who live in the shadows as outcast because the failure of Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Compounded by policies at our southern border designed to deter new arrivals from seeking legal entry or asylum, the United States is facing an identity crisis as a world power once proud to call itself a “nation of immigrants.”

Lepers in Jesus’ time were expelled from their communities and forced live in fear of rejection and denial of their human dignity. Jesus hears their cry for help and sends them back into their communities with the implicit promise of healing. “Show yourselves to the priests.” On the way, they are cleansed. One of them, a double

outcast as a leper and a Samaritan among Jews, returns to thank Jesus and is praised for his faith.

In her time, Mother Cabrini was the emissary of healing for countless immigrants, the “poor, tired, huddled masses yearning to breathe free” in the poem by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. Her example is incarnate in the many advocates now serving at the border and in immigration offices across the country. Sr. Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities in the Rio Grande Valley, has welcomed and comforted countless thousands of asylum seekers in shelters and with support as they wait in Mexico to apply for legal entry.

History will one day judge these difficult times in the light of Jesus’ care for outcasts and the heroic commitment of Mother Cabrini to serving the most vulnerable of peoples in their hour of need. Many of them are remembered in cherished photographs and legal papers. They were our own grandparents and great grandparents.

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