Opinion

Guest Voices



Pope Francis addresses a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress as then-Vice President Joe Biden (left) and then-Speaker of the House John Boehner look on in the House of Representatives Chamber at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Sept. 24, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Ten years ago — it doesn't seem like it's been that long, but the calendar tells me it has been — it was quite an exhilarating time for me and my parish family and, in fact, the whole Washington metropolitan region. I was still a fairly new, first-time pastor serving the wonderful community of Our Lady Queen of the Americas Parish in Washington and we were all eagerly anticipating the visit of a very special guest — the first pope from the Americas, Pope Francis.

At a media briefing before the papal visit, I said we would see a huge river of Hispanic people coming from all directions to gather as one flock along the parade route to see him and celebrate, rejoice and make fiesta because the Holy Father would be with us. Then, when that day arrived, we saw all that and more. But, as I had emphasized, he came to speak to *everyone* — to those native to the United States, to the peoples of all the Americas, and to the world. "Pope Francis embodies the culture of encounter, the church without borders where no one is a stranger," I said.

His Holiness did not disappoint. He spoke the voice of faith "which tries to bring out the best in each person and in each society." His inspiring words offered not only comfort, but also an appeal to the better angels of our nature, an appeal to "move forward together, as one, in a renewed spirit of fraternity and solidarity, cooperating generously for the common good." Amidst a "disturbing social and political situation" of conflict, polarization and brokenness, Pope Francis urged that our nation's leaders and all of us summon the resolve to respond with hope and healing, and support one another with respect for our differences.



Pope Francis addresses a joint meeting of Congress at the U.S. Capitol in Washington in this Sept. 24, 2015, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In his address to a joint meeting of Congress and as the son of an immigrant family, the Holy Father pointed out that "millions of people [have come] to this land to pursue their dream of building a future in freedom," adding that "most of us were once foreigners [or] descended from immigrants." Consequently, he said, "when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past" which sometimes treated immigrants with hostile cruelty, treating them as criminals or as being harmful to the country. "We must resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible."

To another group of marginalized people, the homeless, Pope Francis offered pastoral affection and assurance. "Faith gave Joseph the power to find light just at the moment when everything seemed dark," he told them. "As it did for Joseph, faith makes us open to the quiet presence of God at every moment of our lives, in every person and in every situation. God is present in every one of you, in each one of us."

> 'Nonetheless, when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past.'
>
> —Pope Francis, address to U.S. Congress, Sept. 25, 2015
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Ten years after his apostolic journey, the words of our dear Pope Francis of happy memory continue to touch us, but how did we do in practicing what he preached?

"*Siempre adelante*!" the Holy Father cried out at the Mass for the canonization of St. Junípero Serra, repeating the motto of the new saint. "Forward! Let's keep moving forward!" Have we personally or as a nation moved forward?

Related: Read Pope Francis' homily at the canonization of Serra

It pains me to say that, as we look around at the situation today, the country has actually moved *backward* in many ways, certainly with respect to the treatment of migrants and refugees. But not only them. Social division, disregard for the good and dignity of others, especially the poor and vulnerable, the throwaway culture, and a lack of civility in discourse are all on the rise.

Homeless people in our area have seen their shelters taken away and are being threatened with prosecution and imprisonment for the "crime" of being poor and without housing. Meanwhile, the presence of military troops on our streets only adds to social tensions. By being deployed in this way, the good men and women in uniform who deserve our thanks for their service are instead being disserved. The claimed reason for this militarization is to fight crime, but it appears the primary targets of this increased activity are people who come from foreign countries.

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After seeing it happen elsewhere for months, the "war of fear and terror" against the migrant and refugee communities and their families has now descended upon us. For some weeks now, people who sit next to us in church or send their kids to our schools, people who live in our neighborhoods and are gainfully employed in various occupations contributing to the common good, have been snatched by government agents and detained or threatened with summary expulsion from the country. This includes many who have visas or have lived here for years with green cards.



Agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detain a man after conducting a raid at the Cedar Run apartment complex in Denver on Feb. 5, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)

Yet, there are indications from government officials that some immigrants will be allowed to stay and even given "special" treatment: These are the people who work in menial jobs in the agriculture and hospitality industries, the migrant labor that is already exploited with harsh working conditions and low, if not illegal, wages.

It is no exaggeration to say immigrants helped build this country. The generations who have come here from around the globe for the opportunity of a better life did so not to get handouts, but to find the dignity of work. Many have obtained careers in professional employment.

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But it is also true that many immigrant workers, our brothers and sisters, continue to suffer grave violations of their dignity. They harvest our food, clean our buildings, care for the elderly, build our homes, and prepare and serve our meals. Too often, however, they remain invisible, exploited, underpaid and fearful. Now, they are increasingly being treated as criminals, living under constant threat of deportation — even when they are legally in the country and have built families here.

Related: ICE detentions in immigration courts prompt alarm from Catholic advocates

On this 10th anniversary of the visit of Pope Francis, I hope we finally begin to take his message to heart. As a faith community called to be a leaven of encounter and fraternity, if not as a people, we must recommit ourselves to "building a society which is truly tolerant and inclusive" and recognize that "we have a shared responsibility for others," as urged by His Holiness.

"Now is the time for courageous actions and strategies," the pope said in his address to Congress. This work of defending and promoting the dignity of every person is not optional; it is a demand of faith and a matter of justice.

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