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Words Matter

by Pat Marrin

Immigration and the Church

Opinion

Recent remarks by Kansas lawmaker Virgil Peck that undocumented immigrants should be shot from helicopters like feral hogs (characterized later as "just kidding") have reopened an important conversation about language and violence.

Fear-engendering politics, an old phenomenon that can now go viral on the Internet (Peck's remarks were reported in British newspapers), have always begun with pejorative and demeaning language. Think of all the ethnic slurs used to describe recent immigrants by earlier groups who claim superiority and fear encroachment. The label "illegal aliens" only tops the list of dehumanizing slurs used against immigrants from Mexico and Central America who have been coming to Kansas for decades to take back-breaking and dangerous jobs in agribusiness and meat packing industries.

Language has consequences, defines behavior, and justifies actions that, after the spell of fear is broken, are revealed as inhumane and unfair. A striking example of this took place in Postville, Iowa, in May 2008, federal agents raided Agriprocessors, a kosher meatpacking plant and seized almost 400 undocumented, mostly Guatemalan workers. The raid and its aftermath are described in a detailed and moving documentary produced by Guatemalan film maker Luis Argueta, (www.abusedthepostvilleraid.com). During the raid, workers were reportedly called "rats" and rounded up with drawn guns and batons, shackled and led to waiting buses. They were transported to Waterloo, Iowa, and detained for processing at a fairgrounds facility named the "National Cattle Congress."

The director of the American Immigrant Lawyer Association in Waterloo, David Wolfe Leopold, says in the film: "The workers, like the cattle they worked with at Agriprocessors, were processed through a

makeshift judicial assembly line designed for one purpose, to convict them as felons and deport them." Jens Krogstad, a reporter at the Waterloo Courier, expressed surprise that the federal agencies that prepared the multi-million dollar showcase raid did not see the terrible PR disaster in their choice of the Cattle Congress facility.

In just days, the some 400 workers were arraigned, charged, convicted, sentenced and dispersed to prisons, where most served five months for identity theft and were then deported. Interpreters, defense attorneys and even one of the US District Court judges asked to participate expressed shock at the accelerated and coercive nature of the process. Eric Camaya Freixas, a court interpreter hired by the government, criticized the process as humiliating and unprecedented, asking, "How did we ever get to this as a nation."

The film is straightforward and dispassionate, letting the participants and the circumstances speak for themselves. As a review of the methods evolving after Guantanamo Bay, where calling someone a terrorist justifies suspension of due process and all human rights conventions in the name of national security, the Postville raid is worthy of study in every law school in the country. What can be done "legally" to some people can be done to anyone.

How we got here as a nation is the product of fear, fear that justifies dehumanizing, even demonizing other human beings. And this begins with language, and hidden prejudices that invoke a knowing smile and seem acceptable back home in the coffee shop but cause gasps and incredulity in a legislative hearing room.

Amnesia about our own ethnic roots and ancestral struggles adds irony to the ignorance of some American citizens pulled into the propaganda being injected into the public discourse. One wonders if Mr. Peck has any pictures on his office walls of great grandparents from the British Isles or Europe who came in waves to Kansas in the 19th century to work in the coal mines of southeastern Kansas, jobs only the desperate would do. The causes of immigration today bear striking parallels to the violence and poverty that drove millions of Irish, Italians and Germans to escape their countries of origin to come to America .

We need more facts and accurate stories to restore perspective and fairness. Putting a human face on crisis is one place to start. We have so much work to do and cannot begin soon enough.

[Pat Marrin is editor of Celebration, the worship resource of the National Catholic Reporter. Visit www.celebrationpublications.org/conference for more views on the church's role in immigration reform.]



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