

# IS THERE ROOM FOR ME?

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## Introduction

**A**ngie Pecararo is the kind of parishioner pastors pray for—and depend on. Faith-filled, hard-working, sane, always ready to get involved, Angie would tackle any parish need and do it well. She never seems to burn out.

That's why her pastor was so surprised to hear that she was leaving the parish. After Mass one Sunday, she told him it was true. She and her husband were switching to a parish out in the suburbs, about thirty minutes away. "I don't know, Father," she said. "You and I have talked and argued about this lots of times. The parish just seems to be changing. It's becoming so Spanish. We just don't feel like we belong here anymore."

When Angie's pastor told me this story recently, I felt some sympathy for them both. Many American Catholics know how Angie feels, even if they don't agree with her. Immigration has brought a lot of changes to our neighborhoods and parish communities, and the changes seem to show no signs of slowing down. And along with the changes have come new tensions—for immigrants and longtime residents alike. No matter if

we are just moving in or watching the parish change, it's easy to ask, "Is there [still] room for me? How can I [still] feel at home here?"

And we are all aware that our increasingly divisive and bitter national debates over immigration laws and border policies make these local tensions even worse. We come to Mass with images in our minds of refugee families pulled apart, and frightened, crying toddlers standing alone before immigration officials. A DRE recently told me that several teens in her parish missed a confirmation retreat because they and their families had been caught up in ICE raids and they had to attend deportation hearings. While this DRE was busy talking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, she told me, she was unaware that her mostly immigrant confirmation group was processing the scary thought of losing their mom or dad or of being sent "home" themselves to countries few of them even remember.

No matter how we feel about national policies, no matter how these policies evolve in the years ahead, that DRE's story is a sharp reminder that few of our parishes are completely untouched by the challenges and tensions of immigration.

"Is there a place for me?" "Is there still a place for me?" Our faith teaches us that the answer is Yes. Even

the word catholic comes from Greek roots meaning “encompasses all.”

But if only it were that simple!

Our parishes are all in this together. We all share the same cultural tensions, the same need to get some perspective on the immigration issue and what it means in our lives. It’s natural for Catholics to feel uncomfortable with all this. Immigration issues are very complicated, and change is never easy. How do we cherish and celebrate who we are while still being able to respect and treasure the culture, or the viewpoint, of another? How do we build and share an identity as Catholics in America, and as Americans? Can we really believe that all of this is a blessing for our church? That what will emerge from these cultural mixtures will be stronger and more fruitful than what we had?

I wrote this booklet because I have seen the blessings immigration can bring to our neighborhoods and parishes. And I wrote it because I have also felt the tensions in a parish that come from cultures bumping into each other. I hope it will contribute to your own thoughts and discussions, so that in the end, we all might better respond to Jesus’ prayer that we may all be one.

## 8 Key points for discussing immigration

### 1 Immigration stories are at the center of our faith.

The wanderings of Abraham and Sarah, the Jewish people as immigrants in Egypt and then in the promised land, and don't forget this story from the gospel: "An angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up! Hurry and take the child and his mother to Egypt! Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is looking for the child and wants to kill him'" (Matthew 2:13–14).

Imagine for a moment the Holy Family leaving in the middle of the night, fleeing violence and political oppression of the worst kind. Centuries of Christian piety have given Mary a donkey to ride, but the Scriptures never mention one. Perhaps, being poor, they walked the road with little more than the clothing on their backs, the infant Jesus held tight against the Blessed Mother in an ancient Jewish version of a baby sling. They would have had to search for food, all while avoiding the numerous bandit gangs that preyed on travelers and migrants.

We don't know where in Egypt they settled. There

was a large well-established community of Jews in Alexandria, but most of them were educated, urban sophisticates who might not have thought much of Galilean peasants like Joseph and Mary. Perhaps instead, the Holy Family settled on their own in some small Egyptian city or village. If so, what were the chances Mary and Joseph spoke one of the Demotic dialects common in Egypt at the time, or much Greek? Probably not very

Do not mistreat or abuse foreigners who live among you. Remember, you were foreigners in Egypt.

**EXODUS 22:20-22**

great. Joseph would have stood out as a foreigner as he tried to pick up whatever work he could find. We easily can imagine Egyptian laborers and bosses telling him to go back to where he came from or cheating him because there was nothing Joseph could do about it. And if Mary didn't speak the local language, imagine how isolated she would have felt in whatever little place they found to live. She may have spent many days with little Jesus homesick for her kin on the grassy plains of Galilee.

Political oppression, seeking safety, crossing borders, not knowing the language or culture, pining for home—Joseph, Mary, and Jesus shared the classic immigration story. And it's a story we all share.

## **2 In the United States, we're all immigrants.**

Everyone who is in this country is here because they or their ancestors came here from someplace else. And the “we were here first” argument—sometimes stated, but much more often implied—doesn’t seem really helpful, unless most of us using it are ready to move out and give the whole continent back to Native American families and tribes, some of whom can legitimately claim to have been here some twelve thousand to perhaps even twenty thousand years before the rest of us.

With the terrible exception of Africans brought here as slaves, most immigrants came for the same basic reasons—fleeing violence, poverty, and oppression, searching for a better life, better land, dignity, opportu-

### **“NEVER FORGET YOUR ROOTS!”**

A priest I know loves to tell the story of Cardinal Cushing of Boston, speaking to wealthy, mostly Irish parents of debutantes at a Catholic cotillion. The Cardinal began by reminding them that their ancestors had stepped off the boat only a few decades before. “When you put on your fancy furs and expensive jewelry,” he continued gently, “do not forget the former social and economic condition of your parents or grandparents who were aliens in a strange land, hated by some, oppressed, exploited, and often unemployed. Never forget your roots.”

nity. And virtually every immigrant group—sometimes with reason—looks with fear and resentment toward the group that comes after them.

The charges are older than our republic: Immigrants take our jobs, they don't understand democracy, they don't speak our language, they enjoy our freedoms, and they send their money home.

If these charges haven't been made against us, they probably were made against our ancestors—leading to the third key concept.

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### **3 We need to connect with the stories of our own immigrant peoples.**

In 1840s Philadelphia, a mob of anti-Irish bigots dragged two cannon off a Navy frigate in the harbor and set them up in front of a Catholic church. They fired shot and shell all night until the church was reduced to smoking rubble.

Most immigrant groups of the past two hundred years have faced prejudice and distrust and the charge that they didn't have what it took to be good Americans. Persons known as nativists, those who opposed immigration—especially the immigration of Catholics—were a powerful force in nineteenth-century America. When the first great waves of Irish immigrants began

arriving in the 1840s, nativist mobs often went on a rampage, burning churches and convents, with the authorities often looking the other way.

When nativists weren't busy burning the Irish out of house and home and church, they were arguing that the Irish immigrants were too stupid, too backward, too drunk, and too Catholic to be good Americans. How could a people like that ever learn democracy? And nativists made similar charges against virtually every group of Catholic immigrants that followed the Irish.

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#### **4 Even Catholics have not always warmly welcomed other Catholics.**

Before the huge wave of Irish immigrants landed in Boston, starting in the 1840s, the Catholic bishop of Boston and his clergy moved fairly easily in genteel, upper-class society. The newly arrived, often desperately poor, immigrants, however, shared none of that. There was a real fear among the native Catholic clergy that the Irish might never be Americanized. They didn't know what to do with them. In fact, comments historian Donna Merwick in *Boston Priests, 1848–1910* (1973), “The official Roman Catholic policy toward the ill-suited Irish immigrants was that they be slipped into Boston society like a soiled handkerchief into the back pocket.”

The Irish hung on and eventually prospered (and learned English; the first waves of immigrants from Ireland were mostly Irish Gaelic speakers). And the more they prospered, the more Americanized they became.

After a while these properly Americanized Irish sometimes fell into an almost nativist attitude toward newer immigrants. In his fascinating history of the famous and notorious Five Points neighborhood in New York City (*Five Points*, 2001), Tyler Anbinder shows us an Irish-American clergy looking on with horror as Italians begin moving in. Many of the established Irish doubted the Italians had what it took to be good Americans. In fact, in some eyes, the immigrant Italians weren't even very good Catholics. "It is a very delicate matter," wrote one Irish-American bishop to another, "to tell the sovereign pontiff how utterly faithless the specimens of his country coming here really are."

In Five Points, and in established Catholic neighborhoods in many cities, the newly arriving Italians found themselves shut out or relegated to the church basement—so as not to upset the more established members of the congregation, who, quite frankly, put more in the collection plate every week.

But the Italians, like the Irish before them, hung