

**Fr. Vien V. Nguyen, SCJ**  
**Homily Preached at the**  
**2019 Dehon Lecture Series: "Ministry With the Migrants"**  
**April 10, 2019**

**Readings:** Reading 1: Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; Responsorial Psalm: Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56; Gospel: John 8:31-42.

God's involvement in personal and group migration is a major theme in the Bible. Abraham, Sarah, and Lot became migrants going into and out of Canaan (Gen 12). Famine caused Isaac to settle in the land of Gerar as an alien (Gen 26). The Holy Family had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath (Matt 2). And the persecution of the church in Jerusalem in the first century led to the scattering of Christians. In today's first reading from Daniel, the presence of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, indicates that they were in exile and that they and other Jews were at the mercy of the people of their host country (Dan 3).

It appears to us that God is not done with God's involvement in the migration of the people yet. According to the International Migration Report 2017, 258 million people have emigrated from their homes to other countries to escape the circumstances beyond their control: war, persecution, famine, and poverty. I am standing before you and speaking to you as one of the 258 million immigrants

My journey to the United States began with a small fishing boat. Because of the effects of war, communism, and poverty my mom arranged to have everyone in the family leave the country one by one. At the age of 14, I left Vietnam with my aunt and 37 other people, crossing the South China Sea to the Philippines, on a fishing boat that was about 6 feet wide and 20 feet long.

In the first three nights of the journey, everything was fine. But all hell broke loose on the fourth night. The sky turned pitch dark. The wind blew stronger and stronger. The waves grew higher and higher, crashing mercilessly against the fragile boat.

People say: there is one force on earth we never want to be fighting: that is Mother Nature. For us on the boat, we were fighting a losing battle, and death increasingly became our fate. It has been reported that about 50 percent of the Vietnamese boat people never made it to shore.

Amid complete darkness and hopelessness on the vast ocean, there appeared from afar a beacon of light. This light became a beacon of hope for us navigating the dark night. After many hours struggling against the stormy weather, we finally reached the source of the light. It was an oil rig and next to it was a ship. We signaled for help and were gratefully rescued. Shortly after we boarded the ship, our boat sank.

We were eventually transported to a refugee camp for boat people in the Philippines, and there we awaited the approval from the US government for resettlement. After two years in two refugee camps in the Philippines and 29 years in the US, here I am serving the Church as a Dehonian. I am grateful for the opportunity to be in the United States.

I firmly believe that if possible, most people would want to stay with their family and remain in the country where they were born. As Fr. Pablo noted in his blog on Patheos webpage, “being an immigrant is living an uprooted, displaced existence. It is living with a blurry identity of who you are and where you belong.” Case in point: To the Vietnamese, I am too American. To the Americans, I am still Vietnamese. By now you know that I speak English a little funny. The irony is that I speak Vietnamese a little funny, too. “The immigrant,” wrote Fr. Pablo, “belongs to both worlds, and yet at the same time belongs to neither.”

For many immigrants and refugees, relocating to another country is no small matter. We leave behind the environment in which we find familiar and comforting: language, people, and societal structures. And we enter a new one in which we are vulnerable to culture shock, psychological distress, depression, and despair. Psalm 137 captures well the sentiment of displacement: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion.”

One formidable difficulty that immigrants and refugees face upon arriving in the US is the language barrier. All of us who have learned English as a second or third language can attest to the absurdity of the English language, from its bizarre pronunciation to its free-for-all grammar. As someone has pointed out, “There is no egg in eggplant.” “No ham in hamburger.” “No apple or pine in pineapple.” “If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn’t the plural of booth, beeth?” “In what other languages do people drive on the parkway and park on the driveway?” “How can it be hot as hell one day, and cold as hell the next?”

Language barriers cause huge difficulties and make simple interactions seem like frightening tasks. Adults with limited English skills tend to have higher rates of

unemployment and lower wages, taking whatever job is available. Unauthorized immigrants face additional challenges of securing stable jobs. In many major US cities, many immigrant day laborers wait outside home improvement stores waiting for opportunities to earn money for survival. For many of them, a day without a job is a day without food, without shelter, without future.

Then, there is the challenge of displacement. Many unauthorized immigrants live in this country knowing full well that they can't return home to visit their parents, to say good bye to a dying parent, to attend a funeral or the major events in the family. Doing so would mean not being able to return to the US. Consequently, they can only watch from afar.

In an era that has become increasingly anti-unauthorized-immigrants, the Church is inviting us to respond in a way which is human, just, and fraternal. The Church is inviting us to care for those on the margins, which was the passion of our Founder, Fr. Leo John Dehon, and is the mission of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. It is also the commitment of the seminary's sponsoring dioceses and religious communities to care for our neighbors, as we do for ourselves, by providing legal and social services for immigrants.

There's no doubt—immigration is a complex and controversial topic. As Christians, we are called to be a beacon of light to those on the margins. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "Let your light shine before others" (Matt 5:14-16). Jesus, in today's gospel, asks us to know and speak the truth. The truth will set us free (John 8:31-42). But what is the truth? I am tempted to give you a definition of the truth from the perspective of John's Gospel. But I think it's best that you ask the Holy Spirit: What is the truth?