

“You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:20).

This passage from Moses’ presentation of the Law to the migrant Israelites seems very timely for us as Americans today, particularly as we conclude National Migration Week (go to usccb.org for more information). While Christ inaugurated the new covenant, thus rendering much of the old covenant moot, the eternal truths of divine law do not change, and God’s command that we love one another as he has loved us would certainly seem to indicate that his concern for migrants must also be our concern. It would not be an exaggeration to say that God has a special place in his heart for migrants, especially considering that Jesus himself was once an alien, a refugee who fled to Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod.

This concern for the stranger in our midst flies in the face of the current, anti-immigration fervor that has gripped our country. A healthy respect for the integrity of our borders and for the preservation of national security is an essential attitude for every American, and the seemingly endless rash of radical Islamist attacks around the world would give anyone pause when considering just exactly who it is we are allowing to enter our borders.

That said, we as Catholics should be particularly sensitive to the abuse of those just causes when it comes to denying innocent people access to the promise of life, liberty, and happiness that America holds, especially when they have been denied those basic rights in their native country. It was not that long ago that the tide of popular American opinion sought to build a “wall” against Catholic immigration. The fear at that time was not that immigrants were terrorists, but that they were “papists,” subversive infiltrators bringing a foreign political influence into American affairs. The reality was that the vast majority of those Catholic immigrants, while completely respecting the pope’s religious authority, were completely ignorant of the pope’s politics. They were just ordinary people seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

The same is true today. Are there evil people out there seeking to enter our country in order to do us harm? Undoubtedly. Are there innocent and hardworking people out there seeking to enter our country simply to make a better life for themselves and their families? Indeed. Do we have an obligation to welcome the good immigrants and weed out the bad? Absolutely, but not by denying the great blessings of our nation to those who need them the most based solely on a bigoted prejudice against all immigrants, or all immigrants of a particular ethnicity or religion. There is no place in our Catholic faith, or our fundamental national ethos, for denying immigration simply because people are migrants, or are from the Middle East, or are Muslims. On the contrary, our faith and our fundamental belief as Americans in the equality of all people requires us to welcome the alien and the stranger, though it does not require us to shut off our brain or our instinct for self or national preservation. Let us pray that our national and international leaders may be guided by God’s Spirit to plan and implement policies to charitably welcome immigrants and to justly secure borders, and may we all, as pilgrims on the journey, cultivate a new attitude toward our migrant and displaced brothers and sisters, whatever their ethnicity or faith.