

NEW SANCTUARY MOVEMENT: PROPHETIC HOSPITALITY

Introduction

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be part of this gathering. I regret that I could not join you in person but thanks to modern technology we could have a live interactive webcam conversation this afternoon while I sit in my office here in San Francisco, California.

I am a United Methodist minister from the Philippines and currently a political asylee in the United States due to the systematic killings and abductions of social activists in my home country. I am working as a community and interfaith organizer supporting economic justice and immigrant workers' rights in San Francisco.

As an asylee and also a person of faith, I consider any space – be it physical, moral, spiritual, or political – that is dedicated for the safety and well-being of people and appropriated to uphold the basic dignity of human life and the natural order as sacred space. Sanctuary as sacred space inspires the moral imagination of the interfaith community, and challenges the legal and political framework peddled in the public square.

While some see the sacredness of this space rooted ontologically, I venture to add that this space is made sacred by the struggles of people – their sweat, blood, and tears – in making sure that the prevailing hegemonic socio-political and economic power system is called to task for its abuse and attacks on the lives and rights of human beings to live and work with dignity and respect.

I believe that this sacred space we lift up today transcends physical borders yet is also physical to provide one's economic needs. It transcends the dogmas of institutional religions yet its advocacy is rooted in the basic goodness of life – the spark of divinity, some say – that is inherent in every human being. This space encompasses the physical and spiritual, and shapes the personal and political.

I was asked to speak about the New Sanctuary Movement in the United States, and share with you how the interfaith community has been actively part of this campaign in support of immigrants and their rights as human beings. I will give a brief sketch of the current situation of undocumented immigrants in the United States, run through a brief historical background of the New Sanctuary Movement, enumerate its goals, discuss its rootedness in religious traditions, and how it advocates given the current climate of hate and xenophobia in the United States. I will also share what we are doing in the San Francisco Bay Area as part of the New Sanctuary Movement.

Hopefully, this conversation would present us with concrete ideas for action to compliment the academic and theoretical discussion on the subject. I plan to speak briefly to have more time for your comments and questions.

Historical Background

What we refer to as the original or the first sanctuary movement was born in the 80s when refugees from Latin America fled to the United States to escape the violence perpetrated by dictatorial military regimes. The federal government at that time would have denied these refugees because many of them come from countries whose military dictatorship are close allies of the United States. The faith community, many inspired by liberation theology emanating from the experiences of the marginalized in Latin America, was mobilized to provide physical sanctuary to these individuals and families in facilities owned by these religious groups like church basements. Some very supportive individuals even opened their homes to these refugees.

During the last couple of years, the government of the United States tightened its grip on immigration concerns. Its Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, aptly called ICE for its cold and insensitive policies and tactics toward undocumented immigrants, sow fear in the community and cause the separation of families with

undocumented individuals and citizens. They always say that they are merely following the law, which is correct. However, the current immigration laws of the US need serious reform. I believe that any law that causes and perpetuates poverty and discrimination is unjust. Recently we have had situations when Hindu and other non-Judeo-Christian clergy or religious leaders have been denied a religious worker's visa because they don't fit the standard definition of what a religious worker is as described in the law.

This form of discrimination built into the law has also spilled onto the way people see immigrants. After the 9-11 bombings, the Sikh community – and everyone wearing a turban for that matter – experienced acts of hate and racial discrimination. Currently there are 12 million or so undocumented individuals in the United States. They come to seek a better life for their families. They are economic refugees that are being taken advantaged of because of their immigration status. They receive poverty wages, no job security, and under constant threat of arrest, detention, and deportation. I will let Carlos talk about other current events around ICE enforcement, unless you have questions related to this later.

In 2006, a bill was proposed penalizing people who provide humanitarian aid without asking the immigration status of individuals receiving this support. Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles, California instructed his priests to disregard this if it becomes law. This sparked the beginning of the New Sanctuary Movement. In 2007, coming from about 18 cities, representatives from 17 religious traditions and organizations met in Washington, DC to listen to the stories of deportations and family separations. This convening launched the New Sanctuary Movement.

They set the guiding principles or values as:

- They are coming from a faith platform with focus on faith-based moral principles
- Reframing immigrants from being seen as victims to being witnesses
- Emphasis on cultural and religious diversity
- Ensuring the dignity of those we serve and those who oppose the movement
- Openness to public witness meaning being willing to take the consequences of our actions

A United Methodist Church in Chicago, Adalberto UMC provided sanctuary to Elvira Arellano. She was seen as a champion of immigrant rights. ICE arrested her in Los Angeles when she left the church for a conference. Now another person is now being provided sanctuary. ICE has been public with its unwritten policy that they will not go into churches and schools. So far that's the case.

The Goals of the movement are:

- To protect immigrant workers and families from unjust deportation
- To change the public debate
- To awaken the moral imagination of the country
- To make visible immigrant workers and families as children of God

The leaders of the movement went public with this statement: “We are united in opposing the current series of raids and ensuing deportations, and we agree to call for an end to these practices as they separate children from their families until our broken immigration system is fixed.”

Religious/Theological Foundations

From its own website, the New Sanctuary Movement states that it was born “with the goal of protecting immigrant families from unjust deportation, affirming and making visible these families as children of God and awakening the moral imagination of the country through prayer and witness.” They have termed this “prophetic hospitality.”

That statement clearly grounds this movement, as is the first sanctuary movement in the 80s, in clear religious terms. The theological notion of “imago Dei” or the image of God has strong Judeo-Christian roots. The same is true of the statement about everyone being a “child of God.” I imagine that other religious traditions would probably have a dynamic equivalent that basically speaks about the dignity of human life, and respect for human labor.

Alienation, a concept which has been appropriated by Marx, has very deep roots in theology. Christian theologian Paul Tillich defined sin as “estrangement” from the divine – which points to broken relations with the divine and one’s fellow human beings. This is also true with being alienated from one’s own basic human dignity. This state of estrangement and alienation is perpetrated by many factors that form part of the current sanctuary debate. I see this mainly in the xenophobia of people – the fear of another culture, or the dominance of another language. Its very strong in the United States.

The religious groups and organizations that form the New Sanctuary Movement seek to bridge this moral gap in the current laws. Any unjust law is immoral as Augustine puts it. Providing sanctuary also takes its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures where individuals who think they are being charged unlawfully or think there is a mistrial of their case can seek sanctuary in certain designated sanctuary cities where they can ask for relief and retrial of their cases. There is also a specific passage that states a person who clings to the horns of the temple altar where sacrifices are made in public cannot be arrested. These provisions in sacred text emphasize the physical nature of sanctuary, and also bring to the fore the immorality and unjustness of laws that alienate people from others and perpetuate broken relations.

A few years back I was looking for a present, a baseball cap, to send to my friend in the Philippines. After was checking the cap after I bought it and the tag read: “Made in the Philippines.” As I sit here today, I am aware that my shirt is made in Mexico, and the tech gadgets I am using come from China. The sanctuary movement, I believe, is also rooted in our interconnectedness as bearers of life. It highlights relationships that transcend national boundaries, race, language, religion, and culture in general. The words of Martin Luther King inspire us to struggle on: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” In the union world we say, “An Injury to one is an injury to all.”

Organizing in San Francisco

I understand that Carlos will talk about organizing and probably current news about the plight of undocumented immigrants in the United States. I will just focus on what we are doing in the San Francisco bay area and open up for discussion.

A key anchor organization of the New Sanctuary Movement is the organization I work with, called Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice or CLUE.

1. SF is a sanctuary city
2. We have sanctuary clusters in different parts of the bay area with religious groups and organization signed up to provided help in the form of advocacy, accompanying people to court dates, visiting people in jail, making sure there are what we call “chaplains to immigrants” when arrests are made.
3. We are part of a rapid response network in the city made up of direct service organizations, the city’s health department, advocacy groups, the local labor council and a coalition of labor unions that have taken immigrant rights as its main work, the religious community, and lawyers and firms providing pro bono support to those arrested.

4. We are currently mapping out resources from the faith community to respond to the raids.

Let me close with a statement from Elvira Arellano who was in sanctuary. Before she was arrested she spoke at a conference in Los Angeles. She went up the stage with her child. With their hands clasped she said: “these hands clean your homes, make your beds, cook your food, we do the dirty job, we make things easy for you....these are the hands of America.” With Elvira we reach out to be prophets in the public square.