

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

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DONALD TRUMP AND POPE FRANCIS

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Pope Francis's assertion that a person who builds only walls between nations and no bridges is not a Christian makes him look like he's deliberately intervening in United States election-year politics. Donald Trump certainly construed it that way, saying that he resented having his own standing as a Christian drawn into question by insisting that he would build a wall along the border between Mexico and the United States. Some of the Pope's critics might have added that he seems to be judging Trump and others though when asked in 2013 about gay priests Francis famously answered "Who am I to judge?"

An important part of the preparation for his visit to Mexico was how best to handle the question of immigration that thanks to Trump is front and center in U.S. presidential politics. For instance, in his homily at the Mass in Ciudad Juarez that is situated across the border from El Paso Francis stated that migration is a global problem and touched on the "rights of migrants." Fully consistent with his emphasis during the Year of Mercy, Francis invokes the Christian virtue of mercy as an essential remedy for this problem.

Sadly, he missed an opportunity to avoid offending Americans who share Trump's position on immigration when he addressed the suffering but not the rights of migrants. The rights that John Paul II discussed at length in his 1981 social encyclical *Laborem Exercens* and which today is part of the Church's own social teaching.

In that encyclical John Paul asserted the following in section 23 regarding emigration in search of work. "Man has the right to leave his native land for various motives – and also the right to return – in order to seek better conditions of life in another country." This right is grounded in the fundamental dignity of every human person. In other words John Paul is construing emigration not in terms of the Christian virtue of mercy but the practical virtue of justice that applies to everyone whether Christian or not.

John Paul admits of serious problems associated with emigration and argues that "every possible effort should be made [through just legislation] to ensure that it may bring benefit to the emigrant's personal, family and social life, both for the country to which he goes and the country which he leaves." Further on, he adds that "the most important thing is that the person working away from his native land, whether as a permanent emigrant or as a seasonal worker, should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in that society in the matter of working rights."

Though he mentions it only once in *Laborem Exercens* John Paul calls attention to the Church's teaching on the universal destination of the goods of the world. The goods of the world are intended not just for those who produce them but for every human being. The universal need of all humankind to access the goods required for their basic material needs is more important than the property rights of those who produced them. It follows that emigration to provide access to those goods is a fundamental human right. More than a century ago in the United States, emigrants from Poland, Italy, Germany, Ireland and other countries, including persons who were penniless and functionally illiterate, in effect were exercising that right.

Trump should be offended when his standing as a Christian believer is questioned. At the same time, emigrants should be offended when their rights are violated by a wall that denies them access to the goods required for their basic material needs. Trump seems blind or at least insensitive to the rights of emigrants and how his wall would trample on their dignity as human persons. Francis seems blind or poorly advised when he rests his case on the virtue of mercy that demands a Christian response to the sufferings of emigrants and their families rather than the practical virtue of justice that appeals to all human beings whether they follow Christ or not.

Without judging their sincerity or intentions in this matter, it's time for both men to take off their blinders.

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