

A Celebration of Life and Culture
The Twin Cities Continues to Welcome Migrants and Refugees
Archbishop Harry J. Flynn
June 20, 2004

On the occasion of World Refugee and Migrant Day, I want to extend my personal welcome to those who are newly making their home in our metropolitan area. I welcome persons from Africa, South East Asia, Eastern Europe, Central and South America and other parts of the world.

As was the case for many of our foremothers and forefathers, emigration does not come easily. It did not come easy for the Irish, the Germans, the Scandinavians. It does not come easy to the Hmong, the Liberians, the Somalis, the Bosnians or the Hispanics. As in the early days of immigration to this country, many people are experiencing the destructive results of significant economic and political upheaval. War, persecution, discrimination, intolerance, and economic injustice have created situations where many of our brothers and sisters have been forced to leave their native lands and to look for the peace and security that only their fellow global neighbors can offer. While the change may be a welcomed one, it is never easy to be a stranger in a strange land.

As people of good will, who recognize the horrific world problems and the resulting poverty and dislocation, we can react by sending aid to foreign nations; we can send food, clothing, medical supplies and the means to develop economic enterprise. We can and we must do this.

But we must also take those who are uprooted and displaced into our community as brothers and sisters. In the 1800s the Irish who were starving to death in Ireland were regarded by Americans as unfortunate victims to be generously helped. But the same Irish, having crossed the Atlantic to starve in Boston or New York, were described as the scourge of Europe and resented as an intolerable burden to the taxpayer.

As we look at current migration patterns, we must ask ourselves how we are going to respond to today's new immigrants. Will they be treated like a plague to be made invisible and without rights? Or are we going to overcome whatever fears and suspicions we might have and open our arms and hearts in a way that welcomes today's newcomers. People who have been uprooted, who have left all that is familiar, need to be reconnected to community in a way that fosters healing, economic independence and the development of their full human potential.

Over the years, refugees and immigrants have contributed to the genius of the United States. They have helped to create opportunities to live out our U.S. values of freedom, equality and opportunity; they are a sign of renewal and revitalization. Historically, this nation was founded by refugees for refugees. We cannot close our doors or shut our eyes to the transformation from human tragedy to human possibility that can happen.

Of course, welcoming the newcomers among us is not without its problems. Different cultures and customs, different languages and religions, while a source of enrichment, can be a source of

discomfort, division and alienation. Many, especially since the events of September 11, have responded to new immigrants in a way that stigmatizes, vilifies and dehumanizes. But, in fact this response has little to do with the reality of the current situation. Most of those coming to the United States are not criminals and terrorists. For the most part, these people are courageously determined to do whatever they can to provide a better life for themselves and their families. They do not want to live apart and isolated but want to become part of the community in a way that recognizes and celebrates who they are.

Catholic Charities, along with many other social service agencies, has welcomed refugees and immigrants to the Twin Cities for many years. In 2004, it is estimated that over 4000 will come, and sixty percent of them will be from African nations. In the past 50 years our nation has welcomed five million refugees and the Catholic Church has assisted in resettling one million of them. We have witnessed the personal pain and loneliness. We have also witnessed their persistence and flexibility in the face of many obstacles. We know how they have enriched our lives and our culture.

I fervently pray that we can assist those coming to our shores by doing whatever we can to help them find secure housing, employment and education. I pray that we will be a community of neighbors who will respond in charity and justice. And I pray, too, that the Catholic Churches in this community will provide leadership as a sacrament of unity and hope. As Jesus says in Matthew 25: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me."