Standing on Holy Ground:
Responding to the Call for Sanctuary

by Scott Wright

Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern
Scott Wright is the director of the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach, which serves as the justice, peace, and integrity of creation office of the United States Region of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. Much of the work of the Columbans is focused on justice for immigrants and environmental justice. On December 12, 2016, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas, and the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach in Washington, D.C., publicly affirmed their support for sanctuary:

The Missionary Society of St. Columban is committed to welcoming and providing sanctuary for migrants and refugees, especially in the face of the increasing deportations of immigrants and refugees fleeing violence and seeking asylum in the United States, and the growing problem of their inhumane treatment in detention centers…Columbans have a long history of caring for migrants and refugees as part of our missionary identity. The biblical witness of sanctuary is one that we put into practice through our mission centers, welcoming migrants and refugees fleeing violence, religious persecution, extreme poverty and the impact of climate change. Christian churches have always been places of refuge, and St. Columban, our patron saint and founder of many monasteries in Europe, was an early practitioner of that tradition.

Scott worked in El Salvador for eight years during the civil war, first with Salvadoran refugees in Honduras, and then with pastoral teams accompanying Salvadorans in areas of conflict. In 1991 he returned to Washington, D.C., and from 1991–2008 was a co-coordinator of the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), with a brief interlude in 2005 when he served as the director of the Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico—both faith-based advocacy organizations working for human rights, democracy, and social justice in the region. He also worked with survivors of torture as the advocacy coordinator for TASSC International from 2009-2013.

Scott is the author of Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009/2016) and co-author with Marie Dennis and Renny Golden of Oscar Romero: Reflections on His Life and Writings (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). He also contributed reflections to Carta a las Iglesias, a biweekly journal of the Pastoral Center at the Jesuit University in San Salvador. He lives with his wife Jean Stokan, director of the Institute Justice Team for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and his daughter Maura Stokan-Wright, in Mt. Rainier, Maryland.
I am grateful for the invitation of Education for Justice, project of Center of Concern, to write a brief reflection on the Sanctuary Movement of the decade of the 1980s, and what we are called to do today. For most the 1980s, I lived and worked in El Salvador with Salvadoran refugees and communities living in areas of conflict, so my perspective on the Sanctuary Movement is informed by that experience, and the awareness that the U.S. government was, by its support of military regimes in both El Salvador and Guatemala, directly responsible for the violence that displaced hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, many of whom fled to seek refuge and asylum in the United States.

I returned to the United States for two of those years, 1985-1986, which were crucial years for the Sanctuary Movement. I lived in San Antonio, Texas, at a time when sanctuary activists Jack Elder and Stacy Merkt were finishing their prison terms, and I traveled to Tucson with Jack in January 1986 for a sanctuary symposium to support the 16 sanctuary activists who had been indicted on federal charges of conspiracy and transporting and harboring “illegal aliens.” Later that year, in September, I traveled to Washington, D.C., for a National Sanctuary gathering and heard Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino speak on “Sanctuary and Solidarity: What Have You Done with Your Brother, Your Sister?”

Eventually I learned more about the amazing witness of sanctuary congregations throughout the country, in particular, the work of the San Francisco Archdiocese, the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, and the Tucson Ecumenical Council. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Eileen Purcell, Renny Golden, and Gary MacEoin for sharing with me the powerful witness of what became known as the Sanctuary Movement. In Washington, D.C., my predecessors at EPICA and the Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico, the Rev. Phil Wheaton and Margie Swedish, as well as the Sojourner and Assisi communities, also enriched my understanding of the movement.

Today, however, much has changed, including the nature of the violence in Central America, and other regions, from which refugees are fleeing, as well as the demographics in the United States, with growing numbers of immigrants, both documented and undocumented, leading immigrant movements for justice, and serving as pastoral leaders of churches and congregations. The leadership of immigrant women and young people is also a powerful and effective sign of hope for the future. For that leadership, as well, I am deeply grateful.

It is important that the sanctuary story be told by those who are the main protagonists, the undocumented immigrants and refugees themselves, and to remember that before there was a Sanctuary Movement in the United States, churches and convents in El Salvador and Guatemala were already providing sanctuary.

My intention is to encourage churches and congregations to respond to the call for sanctuary, and to be bold in their defense of the human rights of migrants and refugees. I leave the last word to a beloved voice of hope, the late Howard Zinn, author of A People’s History of the United States:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.
In October 1985, 11 church activists went on trial in a crowded federal courtroom in Tucson, Arizona, in a dramatic church-state confrontation over what it means to obey the law, and what it means to be faithful to the Gospel. The defendants argued that the U.S. government was intruding on their freedom of religion, infiltrating Bible classes, tape-recording conversations, and targeting ordinary citizens for providing support to refugees fleeing violence in their home countries.

Now, 32 years later, on the eve of the inauguration of a new president, a nation of immigrants and the children and grandchildren of immigrants anxiously await to see whether the soon to be president of the United States will make good on his threat to deport millions of undocumented refugees, require Muslims to sign a federal registry, and close our borders to Muslim refugees fleeing violence and war in their Middle Eastern and North African countries.

The trial in Tucson pitted a Catholic nun, two Catholic priests, several lay church activists, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, and a Quaker against the U.S. government. The latter two were among the founders of the Sanctuary Underground Railroad, whose aim was to protect refugees fleeing from the violence of a cruel civil war in El Salvador and a genocidal conflict in Guatemala. The defendants faced a 71-count indictment and were charged with conspiracy, bringing illegal aliens into the country, transporting and harboring them, and encouraging others to do the same. Each count carried a sentence of up to five years in prison and fines amounting to as much as $10,000. Ultimately the defendants were convicted and given probation.

The Rev. John Fife, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church, declared: “The fundamental question is whether the United States as a nation is going to respect human rights, both domestically and in terms of its foreign policy.” 32 years later, that question remains, and the Rev. Alison Harrington, the current pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church, has just declared her church a sanctuary.

What follows is a new chapter in the sanctuary story, one in which we are invited to participate. The stakes are high, as they were then, and the lines are clearly drawn, as they were then: what does it mean to obey the law, and what does it mean to be faithful to the Gospel?

**HISTORY OF THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT**

Thirty-five years ago, in words that express a concern strikingly similar to the anxiety felt by many today, 200 U.S. church leaders addressed a letter of concern to President-Elect Ronald Reagan: “There is increasing and alarming evidence that military governments in many countries are
viewing your election as a green light for suppression of legitimate dissent, and for widespread arrest and imprisonment, torture, and murder.” Only two weeks before, four U.S. church women had been brutally raped and assassinated by the Salvadoran military. The signatures included three U.S. Catholic bishops, the secretary general of the World Council of Churches, and the president of the Maryknoll Sisters.

The Reagan Central America policy was on a collision course with the Church. At the same time, human rights activists were increasingly concerned about the plight of Salvadoran refugees who had crossed the border into the United States, fleeing political repression. More than 500,000 undocumented Salvadorans were living in the United States, and more were arriving each day. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), predecessor to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), was engaged in a concerted effort to deport the refugees back to their violence-torn country. The situation was most critical in the border areas of Texas, Arizona, and California where the refugees were lodged in jails and detention centers.

During the summer of 1981, a Quaker named Jim Corbett began a personal campaign to assist Central American refugees who had been detained along the Arizona border. He approached the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church, The Rev. John Fife, for help. This was the beginning of the Sanctuary Movement, and what became a Sanctuary Underground Railroad.

On March 24, 1982, the second anniversary of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, religious groups in six U.S. cities, representing more than 1,000 churches, joined together in announcing the formation of an interfaith network offering sanctuary to Central American refugees who feared persecution or death if they were forcibly returned to their homeland. Five congregations in Berkeley, California, and one congregation in Tucson, Arizona, publicly declared their commitment to protect Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees fleeing the wars in their home countries. Earlier that same month, the National Center for Immigrants’ Rights filed a class action suit against the INS, charging them with “physical abuse, intimidation, threats and coercion” in dealing with the nearly 400 Salvadorans that were being deported each month.

With the support of the Tucson Ecumenical Council and 10 Tucson churches, the Southside Presbyterian Church fulfilled its promise to accept undocumented refugees from El Salvador. The Rev. John Fife, the pastor, said: “Places of worship are now needed as places of protection.”
In Chicago, Wellington United Church of Christ also declared itself a public sanctuary and opened its doors to a young Salvadoran refugee: “We welcome you into our church who have come so far and suffered so much. We grieve the loss of your mother and father and pray for the safety of your brothers. We offer you sanctuary in this holy building. Our Christian ancestors were people in exodus, a people in exile. To the best of our ability we will protect you, and our God will protect us all.”

When threatened with fines and imprisonment, the chairperson responded: “Dangerous times call for risky responses. The consequences that may happen to Wellington are minimal in comparison to the pain that happens every day to the people of El Salvador and Guatemala.”

But supporting and offering sanctuary was not without risk. Legal consequences for harboring an “illegal alien” could result in a conviction, a fine of up to $2,000 and five years in prison for each “illegal alien.” By supporting and participating in sanctuary, these churches hoped to demonstrate the immorality of the U.S. government forcibly returning refugees to their violence-torn countries, and supporting the very wars in Central America from which the refugees were fleeing. Such actions by the U.S. government were in direct violation of the 1980 Refugee Act which states that refugees who have a “well-founded fear of persecution if returned to their homelands” should be allowed to stay in the United States.

By 1983, the numbers of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing to the United States for protection had swollen, but only seven of 15,000 asylum applications had been granted. The U.S. government argued that these were not “political refugees” but “economic refugees,” and therefore not entitled to asylum. The reality, however, was different. By the end of the decade, more than 75,000 civilians in El Salvador and 200,000 civilians in Guatemala had been assassinated or disappeared, for the most part victims of military regimes supported and funded by the United States.

In Seattle, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen addressed a pastoral letter of concern to his diocese: “The Immigration and Naturalizations Services (INS) have chosen to deny these innocent victims refuge… Some can provide the refugees the means to support themselves. Some can offer refugees from Central America sanctuary from the law, which in this case is being applied unjustly. I want you to know that the Archdiocese will support any and all of these efforts on behalf of Central American refugees. I urge you all to join in these activities.”

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“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

—Leviticus 19: 33-34
St. Benedict the Moor parish in Milwaukee, and Cristo Rey in Racine, became the first two Catholic parishes to offer sanctuary in their churches or on church property, as St. John’s Cathedral and the largest synagogue in the United States, both located in Milwaukee, took steps toward becoming sanctuaries. Archbishop Rembert Weakland said he would give public support “to any Catholic parish that would want to be a sanctuary for Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees,” adding that sanctuary must be done “with the agreement of the parish council.” He told the diocesan newspaper: “Sanctuary is not a way of avoiding justice, but a holy respite so that justice can eventually be done.” In Detroit, St. Rita’s Catholic Church declared sanctuary on December 15, 1983, based on an overwhelmingly positive response from their parishioners.

Meanwhile, the Sanctuary Underground Railroad was beginning to take shape. In 1984, Stacy Merkt and Jack Elder, two sanctuary workers from Casa Romero in San Benito, Texas, were arrested and charged with transporting “illegal aliens.” In court, they challenged these charges, and offered their religious convictions as a defense. In his closing argument, the lawyer for one of the two defendants said: “If the government is prepared to put the Gospel on trial, so be it. The church will not come before the court and apologize for being faithful to the Gospel.” Stacy was sentenced to three months in jail, Jack to five months in a halfway house.

Bishop John J. Fitzpatrick, head of the Brownsville, Texas, diocese where Casa Romero was located, put his full support behind the two sanctuary workers, paid for their bail and testified on their behalf at their trial: “The fourth anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero once more opens the wounds of many Americans who cannot understand our State Department and Pentagon policies that actually help to continue the civil wars in Central America. Our own efforts to bring comfort to the refugees in our midst, because it is the Christian as well as the American thing to do, have resulted in an unfortunate confrontation between our federal government and some Christian people. I stand with those who reach out to their brothers and sisters in their quest for justice.”

By the end of the year, tens of thousands of people across the United States had also signed a “Pledge of Resistance” as a commitment to mount a nationwide grassroots effort to put the U.S. government on notice that it will meet a massive campaign of nonviolent direct action should it decide to intervene militarily in Central America.

In 1985, churches and legal aid groups in 11 cities reported break-ins to search files and documents. Sixteen sanctuary workers were indicted and put on trial in Tucson, Arizona, after the government infiltrated churches and secretly recorded hours of conversations. The 16 were charged with conspiracy, and transporting and harboring “illegal aliens.” More than 1,200 people came to a national symposium on sanctuary at Temple Emanu-El in Tucson to show their solidarity, while thousands of people across the country expressed their support at rallies and demonstrations.
“Sanctuary is not a building. It is a response rooted in faith and nurtured by prayer and conscience that has captured the hearts of tens of thousands of persons across the country.”

Twelve national religious leaders, including the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Benedictine Sisters, as well as the presidents of the National Council of Churches and the Rabbinical Assembly said:

We proclaim our belief in the moral rightness of sanctuary. It will flourish as long as hope, love and a belief in the ultimate authority of God live in the hearts of our people. To prosecute those who have shown leadership in this ministry will not bring it to a halt but rather is likely to swell the ranks of those who will stand firmly in their place.” They then went on to give sanctuary a powerful definition: “Sanctuary is not a building. It is a response rooted in faith and nurtured by prayer and conscience that has captured the hearts of tens of thousands of persons across the country.”

By 1985, the Sanctuary movement included 200 churches nationwide and 100,000 church people assisting several hundred refugees. According to one sanctuary activist, “The main people who do the runs are housewives, elderly people, retirees.” The Rev. John Fife, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson and one of the 16 sanctuary defendants on trial, added: “Whenever the church has been persecuted throughout history, it has strengthened the church, not weakened it.”

In 1985, Jewish congregations declared sanctuary. At the annual meeting of American Hebrew Congregations, 3,000 delegates from 800 reform synagogues overwhelmingly passed a resolution endorsing sanctuary for Central American refugees: “Our own history teaches us the importance of safe haven for those forced to flee their native country. We watched in agony as our co-religionists were trapped by the Nazi horrors in Germany.”

Also in 1985, Fr. Luis Olivares declared Our Lady Queen of Angels, “La Placita,” a public sanctuary: “We have been functioning as an informal sanctuary for years, offering shelter to Central American refugees.” Catholic religious orders declared sanctuary. The Franciscan Friars and the Redemptorists announced that they were declaring their entire western provinces sanctuaries and opening their communities to refugees. Maryknoll issued a statement affirming its support for the refugees: “We affirm our support for the Sanctuary Movement. We have lived and worked among the poor in Central America for the past forty years. We defend these refugees as political refugees fleeing persecution.”

Nevertheless, the deportations continued. Two hundred religious leaders denounced the Reagan administration’s policy of deporting Central American refugees and arresting sanctuary workers. Bishop Frank Murphy from Baltimore called the policy “a moral outrage.” In November, Salvadoran Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas wrote to the U.S. Congress urging them to pass the Moakley/DeConcini bill granting a stay of deportation for Salvadoran refugees in the United States.
In May 1986, eight of the 16 sanctuary defendants were found guilty. Sister Darlene Niegoski, a School Sister of St. Francis, was facing up to 25 years in prison. Her community declared: “We stand with Sister Darlene who, in our name, defended the lives of our sisters and brothers fleeing tyranny and death. As Sisters of St. Francis, we will continue to side with the poor and powerless whatever the cost.”

In the end, the defendants received suspended sentences and probation.

If the government had hoped that the trial would have a chilling effect on the sanctuary movement, its hopes were dashed. Since the January 1985 indictment, the number of sanctuary churches had nearly doubled. Several cities declared sanctuary, and the entire state of New Mexico became the first sanctuary state for Central American refugees. In 1986, the national office of Jesuit Refugee Services was authorized by the 10 Jesuit Provincials “to collaborate with the sanctuary movement to the extent possible.”

By August 1988, the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America estimated there were 464 public sanctuaries, early 80 of which were Catholic parishes or religious congregations. Four years later, the peace accords were signed in El Salvador, putting an end to 12 years of war. A similar accord would be signed for Guatemala in 1996. At a memorial service on the first day of peace, Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino said: “Today, all of El Salvador is holy ground, because where great suffering and great love converge, we are standing on Holy Ground.”

A fitting tribute to the witness offered by the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s.

SANCTUARY MOVEMENT TODAY

Thirty years ago, the Sanctuary Movement first appeared on the scene as a faithful response of churches and synagogues in the United States to the critical situation of Central American refugees fleeing war and violence in their countries, wars that were waged by militaries trained and financed by the U.S. government. What are the lessons learned?
Was the Sanctuary Movement an expression of civil resistance or civil disobedience? Were the churches and people who offered sanctuary upholding international law, and the 1980 U.S. Refugee Law that protected the rights of refugees, or were they breaking the law by transporting and harboring “illegal aliens.” Were they being faithful to the Gospel or defying the law?

After 12 years of war in El Salvador, and more than 34 years of war in Guatemala, peace accords were signed in El Salvador in 1992 and in Guatemala in 1996. More than 75,000 people had been killed in El Salvador, and as many as 200,000 in Guatemala, what the United Nations characterized as genocide. Millions of immigrants had already fled to the United States, many of them given Temporary Protective Status (TPS), enabling them to stay; but many arrived too late to benefit. Currently, an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants from the region live in the United States.

Peace did not come easy to the region; the wars had ended, but the economic roots of the conflict had not been addressed. Free trade agreements in the region, and a global market economy that pitted large corporations against small farmers, destroyed local economies and created the conditions for further migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States. Violence in the region grew, this time driven by drug cartels and by gangs, in El Salvador, Guatemala, and since the military coup in 2009, in Honduras.

During the eight years of the Bush administration (2000-2008), and the eight years of the Obama administration (2008-2016), as many as 400,000 Central American and Mexican immigrants were detained and deported each year, separating families and in many cases returning immigrants to the very situations of violence from which they had fled.

A decade ago, there was hope for a bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform. In cities across the United States, millions of immigrants marched in support of the reform. With the economic depression, however, immigrants and refugees once again became scapegoats. Still, hope remained alive, and into this darkness the light shone, as immigrants, churches and synagogues, and labor unions responded with creative actions of nonviolence and witness.

The world is facing a global migration crisis not seen since the end of the Second World War, with more than 65 million people displaced by war and persecution, two-thirds of them internally displaced. This figure does not include another 19 million, who have been displaced by earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters. The civil war in Syria, a proxy war in which Russia, Iran, and the United States have all played a part, has displaced nearly half the population, with nearly four million refugees and eight million internally displaced people. While financially generous in its support to refugees in the region, the United States has failed to be generous in welcoming Syrian refugees.
Today, we are again at a crossroads, only now the violence looks different, the result of drug cartels and criminal gangs, but also the fruit of failed U.S. political and economic policies toward immigrants and toward a region that continues to be the source of hundreds of thousands of immigrants seeking asylum in the United States. Today, there are more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, and thousands more crossing the U.S.—Mexico border every week, including unaccompanied children and families.

The face of the Sanctuary Movement is also changing, as the demographics change. There are many churches and congregations where undocumented immigrants make up a sizeable portion of the membership. In one Catholic parish in Maryland, for example, more than 90 percent of the members are undocumented. More and more churches and congregations, many of them led by Latino pastors, are protecting their undocumented members by declaring church buildings as “sanctuaries,” but also taking “sanctuary to the streets” and vowing protection for undocumented immigrants living in their homes who are threatened with deportations.31

Despite the many challenges, there are many lights in the darkness. Pope Francis has embraced the plight of migrants and refugees, welcoming them on the Italian island of Lampedusa, encouraging churches across Europe to open their doors to refugees, and inviting a Syrian refugee family to take up residence at the Vatican.

How have the churches, synagogues and mosques responded to this new crisis?

In 2007, a New Sanctuary Movement was born in many cities throughout the country. As workplace and neighborhood raids escalated, these congregations opened their doors to provide refuge to those facing deportation. Seven years later, with a surge in the violence in Central America, increasing numbers of unaccompanied children and families began to present themselves at the U.S.—Mexico border to ask for asylum. The Sanctuary Movement took on new life and a new sense of urgency, especially since these women and children were being detained and targeted for expedited removal.32

The New Sanctuary Movement also helped make possible President Obama’s Executive Actions on the expansion of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA+) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), which would benefit 5 of the 11 million undocumented immigrants from Central America. Now, however, both of these actions are in danger of being overturned by the new administration.33
Despite the discouragement felt by many since the November 2016 election, there are lights on the horizon. At least 18 major Sanctuary Cities, representing 20 percent of all undocumented immigrants in the United States, have pledged to limit their cooperation with federal immigration officials, and the number is growing. Catholic colleges, including the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities representing 27 Jesuit institutions have publicly pledged their support for undocumented students, using every legal means to protect them: “Grounded in our Catholic and Jesuit mission, we are guided by our commitment to uphold the dignity of every person...regardless of their immigration status” and “to work for the common good of our nation, and promote a living faith that works for justice.”

In San Antonio, Texas, the Interfaith Welcome Coalition helped open the doors to a Mennonite Church, literally overnight, to receive more than 400 immigrant women and children who had just been released from the Karnes and Dilley Family Detention Centers after a Travis County judge in Austin issued a ruling against private detention facilities being used as childcare facilities. The traditional manger scene had to be taken down to make room for a real-life manger scene of refugee families, according to Pastor John Garland: “We moved pews and tore down our gorgeous Advent display and Nativity scene. Our sanctuary became a real portrait of the biblical flight to Egypt scene.” And on Christmas Day, faith leaders across the nation offered their churches as sanctuaries to undocumented immigrants facing deportation, including Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, whose pastor, the Rev. Alison Harrington, said: “As pastors we know that each and every family is a holy family.”

Christians and Jews around the country have vowed to sign a government imposed Muslim Registry, if one is instituted, to show their solidarity with their Muslim brothers and sisters. One Jewish survivor who vowed to sign the registry remembered the registration of Jews in Nazi Germany: “Although we’re Jewish, we want to ensure that we don’t have a repeat of what happened in Nazi Germany. Registration of Jews and other seemingly unimportant laws in the 1930s predated the death camps of the ‘40s. Never Again!”

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy called for “widespread opposition” in the event of massive deportations threatened by the new administration: “The Catholic community must move to wide-spread opposition...with the same energy, commitment and immediacy that have characterized Catholic
opposition on the issues of abortion and religious liberty in recent years.” More recently, at the beginning of 2017, Cardinal Blase Cupich, the Archbishop of Chicago, defended the protection of the Dream Act (DACA) which offers 750,000 undocumented young people the chance to fulfill their dreams. It’s the immigrant story, he said, “that has made America great, and we must never stop telling it.”

Sanctuary is not only a building, a safe refuge for a family, but the very identity of what it means to be a community of solidarity. For Christians, solidarity is at the heart of what it means to be a Eucharistic community. Nor does sanctuary mean simply that a particular church or synagogue or mosque “declares” itself a sanctuary; a church or synagogue or mosque is by its very nature a “sanctuary.” It is one of the most ancient traditions we have as people of faith. To be a church, to be a synagogue, to be a mosque—to be an Abrahamic community—is to be a welcoming community, as Abraham and Sarah welcomed the three messengers long ago, who came bearing good news (Genesis 18:1-15).

Jon Sobrino, S.J., in his address to a national sanctuary gathering thirty years ago, emphasized the Good News aspect of sanctuary:

“You began by opening your arms to refugees who came here poor, frightened and defenseless; you aided them in the manner of the Good Samaritan. But you quickly came to see that you weren’t just helping; you were also being helped. In giving, you were receiving; you bore the sufferings and problems of the refugees and they bore yours. In this way a movement of solidarity has grown, so that the refugees are now, for you, the recipients of help they urgently need, but also bearers of Good News for you.”

Sanctuary is what we do because sanctuary is who we are: a sanctuary for the stranger, the migrant and refugee, bound together by a common faith and a common practice of solidarity. It’s a matter of religious identity, and therefore also a matter of religious freedom. And if we are faithful to this witness of welcome and embrace of our neighbor, the migrant and the refugee, if we truly are a community of solidarity, then we are standing on Holy Ground.
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God of all people. We bring before you all who work for the fullness of justice, all who long for the widening of welcome to which your Gospel calls us.

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Displaced God. Born in flight to parents anxious and weary, born anew in those who flee oppression, leaving home and loved ones behind, and staking their lives on the hope of abundant life, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Journeying God. Turned away over and over again by our world’s collective fear of the stranger, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Uprooted God. Suspended in the endless uncertainty that is the daily life of the migrant, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

Waiting God. Waiting today with all who suffer separation from home and the familiar, waiting for safe return, waiting for war’s end, waiting for justice to be restored, we pray:

RESPONSE: Open hearts, open arms, open doors in welcome!

God of all people. Stir us to holy anger over the wounds of our world, move us to action for justice until the fullness of welcome is fulfilled in our midst, and the problems that cause migration – the poverty, the fear, and the suffering – are confronted by all people of good will and transformed by the power of compassion. Amen!


REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read Leviticus 19:33-34 (“When a stranger sojourns with you….”) and Matthew 25:35-36 (“I was a stranger and you welcomed me….”). How do these scriptural readings help us to respond to the needs of refugees and immigrants in our midst?

2. The world is facing the greatest refugee crisis since the end of World War II. What is our obligation as a nation under international law to welcome immigrants who have “a well-founded fear of persecution” if they were to be deported back to the violence from which they fled?

3. “Sanctuary is not a building. It is a response rooted in faith and nurtured by prayer and conscience that has captured the hearts of tens of thousands of persons across the country.” How has your faith community responded to the needs of immigrants and refugees in your midst?

4. “If the government is prepared to put the Gospel on trial, so be it. The church will not come before the court and apologize for being faithful to the Gospel.” Do you agree? What does this statement of faith mean in your local context?
FAITH IN ACTION

1. **Foster Solidarity in Your Community of Faith**: Host an evening discussion about supporting immigrants and refugees in your community, and what your community of faith can do to help.

2. **Respond to Urgent Needs**: Form an emergency response network in your community of faith to accompany immigrant families threatened with deportation and advocate on their behalf.

3. **Advocate**: Advocate to make your city and county a sanctuary for immigrants and refugees, and see that they have the legal, health, education, and employment services they need.

4. **Offer Sanctuary**: Discern with your community of faith whether you are called to offer sanctuary to immigrants or refugees threatened with deportation. “Do not quench the Spirit!” (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

SANCTUARY RESOURCES


4. Sanctuary National Week of Action Communications Toolkit

5. Justice for Immigrants: [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org)


Endnotes


3 El Salvador Report, Newsletter of the Religious Task Force on El Salvador, January / February 1981. The bishops were Peter Gerrity from Newark, Thomas Gumbleton from Detroit, and Peter Rosazza from Hartford. The Secretary General of the World Council of Churches was Eugene Carson Blake, and the President of the Maryknoll Sisters was Melinda Roper.


5 María Cristina García, Seeking Refuge, 98-99.


7 Central America Report, October 1982.

8 Ibid.

9 María Cristina García, Seeking Refuge, 104.


11 Central America Report, March 1983.


14 Central America Report, March 1983.

15 Catholic Herald, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 1982.


17 Ibid.


20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


26 Central America Report, July / August 1986.

27 “Sanctuary is the ‘Inn’ Thing!” Jesuit Refugee Services USA, August 1986.

29 Author’s personal recollection on hearing Sobrino’s remarks on the first day of peace in El Salvador, February 1, 1992.
30 United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) 2015 report.
31 New Sanctuary Movement, Sanctuary Not Deportation: A Faithful Witness to Building Welcoming Communities.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
42 See Jon Sobrino, “Sanctuary and Solidarity: What Have You Done with Your Brother, Your Sister?” an address he gave to a national sanctuary gathering held at St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., in September 1986.