

We Are All Pilgrims and Refugees

Friar Bob Hutmacher, OFM

I have a folder in my room labeled “keepers”; it holds just a few precious letters and documents I’ve deemed important enough to save for years. Among them is a photocopy of a huge document from Prussia that gave a certain Gustavus Julius Hutmacher permission to leave Prussia for the United States. Dated 1845 it describes my great-great grandfather as having blond hair, blue eyes and a large nose. Honest – a large nose! Gustavus settled with other Germans in Quincy, Illinois. Further family research told us he began a grocery store-tavern in Quincy and was well known for his pickles. Honest – his pickles!

My computer holds a file that is 65 pages of our maternal heritage from Ireland, beginning in the 1600’s! I was shocked when our oldest brother found it all because it mentions people our Mom’s mother spoke about, including our Lawless and Dickerson lineage and a priest in County Cork she corresponded with till he died. We have hundreds of names from the Emerald Isle and points east of the Wabash River near Vincennes, Indiana then across the river to Illinois. It records my parents’ wedding day and their five children, even their marriage dates and their children and my ordination to priesthood day. Who gets all this information and from where? My story as the fourth generation of Irish and German immigrants is that of millions of Midwesterners. We all have personal histories that include our ethnic origins. Our city of Chicago has an enlightening and not so pure history when it comes to immigration; the Catholic history here is even more eye-popping. One photo-essay of Chicago Catholicism I’ve read includes signs that read “IRISH NEED NOT APPLY” or POLISH STAY OUT and others similar in tone. And the Great Migration from the Deep South? Read the story of Fr. Augustine Tolton; he lived in Quincy and was assisted by our friars there in his quest for ordination.



Here is a painting by Giotto (1304?) of *The Flight Into Egypt*. Read the second chapter of Matthew’s Gospel for the full story of humans fleeing terror and oppression, seeking freedom and peace by leaving one country for another. Freedom from suffering and release from oppression has been part of our Judaeo-Christian history since Abraham, Isaac, Moses and the New Testament. Scripture – both Testaments – bravely proclaim how refugees are to be treated. *The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. Psalm 146:9.* St. Paul, a Pharisee who turned to Jesus, wrote: *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.* **Hebrews 13.**

Our biblical heritage overflows with the command to shelter, feed, guide and respect any and every human being who flees a country to seek the very basics of human life, as Pope Francis once described refugees. Jesus, Mary and Joseph survived the horrors of infanticide, a practice that unbelievably continues today throughout the world. The article "Estimation of the Number of Missing Females in China: 1900–2000", [2012] estimated that over 40 million females were missing in mainland China. Horrifying, isn’t it? Some countries have since outlawed it, but it also appears in other forms like abortion and cultural taboos about deformities, gender, multiple births, etc. So if we are horrified by the very thought of infanticide, what did the Holy Family know and experience? The same terror and unbearable pain as we do.

Sunday, October 12, ICE police stopped a car in front of St Jerome Church here in Chicago. The scene struck fear in the people attending Mass to the point that the pastor encouraged people of color to ask for escorts to get them home safely. Other religious shepherds have told people to stay home on Sunday, This nation – if you aren't white – is crippled with fear. Absolute fear that is rooted in reality. We've seen ICE troops here in the Loop and many areas of Chicago. Their presence prompted a certain leader to deploy national guard troops to add to the unidentifiable ICE troops. As I see the United States right now, the 50 states and Puerto Rico are not united but shattered. Civil leaders have become either champion bullies or sadly silent but for a few brave ones. The courts? Difficult for us to ascertain any sense of justice and equity as judgements mean nothing to some. Opposing voices are eliminated and, to me, this is the end of democracy. The end. Unless we give the world alternate values and **hope** in a God who saves those who are faithful to God.



Some readers may be upset that I write about this because I'm pushing a certain political agenda. That's not true. What I am trying to "push" is **THE TRUTH**. Any glimpse at history will offer this tired old pattern: power mongers will eliminate all opposition. Selfish gains leave the poor in the dust and no one is happy except the disgustingly wealthy 1%. Our Lord gave his life for the plight of anyone seeking justice, healing and **TRUTH**. Our Lord gave his life for the **HOPE** that calls all God's children to seek the common good. Our Lord gave his life that all of Mother Earth's inhabitants can live with human dignity in a world where everyone shares in the common good. Our Lord gave his life for **THE TRUTH** of salvation through God's mercy.

I have absolutely no fear of speaking the **TRUTH** of God, even if it means conversing with Christians who preach white supremacy. I'm not afraid to challenge the hypocrisy of someone with a hateful heart and has *Jesus is Lord* on the lips. You and I are called to live and preach the Good News bravely, and these days, we are called to live the **TRUTH** like never before. We are called to bring **HOPE** to our world. Think of what Mary and Joseph needed that allowed them to escape and then – return! **HOPE** in God kept them alive and faithful to God.

Pope Leo recently wrote a letter to political leaders. In it he wrote: *"The link between migration and **hope** is clearly evident in many contemporary experiences of migration. Many migrants, refugees and displaced persons are privileged witnesses of **hope**. They demonstrate this daily through their resilience and **trust** in God, as they face adversity while seeking a future in which they glimpse that integral human development and happiness are possible."*

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that at present there are more than twenty-five million refugees and more than forty-one million internally displaced persons worldwide, numbers that have increased yearly. All of these are strangers in the biblical sense, and because, as Joel Baden has observed, for both Jews and Christians "the Exodus story did not end with the departure from Egypt," they all deserve to be loved. *"The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."* – **Leviticus 19:34**

October 17 we remembered St. Ignatius of Antioch (+107), bishop and martyr. He was sent to Rome to be killed; on his journey he wrote seven letters that are remarkable statements of faith. I quote one of them here for you: *"the time of my birth is close at hand. My desire is to belong to God. Let me attain pure light. Only on my arrival there [heaven] can I fully be a human being...you will sympathize with me because you will know what urges me on.* This is **HOPE** in God that gave Ignatius the power to focus on his death to lions as a gateway to *pure light*. His sentences reveal a remarkable view of human nature, as he writes that only as he returns to the heart of his Creator will he be fully human. That is one incredible philosophical

statement about our human existence: human life is not complete until we return to the One who loved us into existence.

There is a brief prayer the presider recites after the Our Father called the embolism (Gk=between); it reads, in part ...”*as we await the blessed **hope** and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.*” That **hope** is exactly what St. Ignatius wrote about, exactly what Pope Leo wrote about. This **hope** is what Mary and Joseph had to survive a very strenuous period in their marriage. When I surrender to God, whether in difficult or pleasant times, there comes about a certain inner peace that drives a woman or man to keep **hope** alive. How did people live through Auschwitz or Buchenwald? How do millions of refugees in the U.S. muster up the courage to go to work, school or church? In 2020 the U.S. admitted fewer than 18,000 of the more than 25,000,000 refugees worldwide; from 1980 to 2017 the U.S. average was 98,000. [from *Bible Odyssey*]. To state the obvious, there is a deep chasm in our country right now, in nearly all areas of our life. However, Pope Leo, Cardinal Cupich and other shepherds encourage us to see the **hope** in refugees and within our biblical heritage, “*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*” **Hebrews 13.**

Hope brings us to the joy God’s Eternal Banquet. **Hope** is what enlivened Moses and our other patriarchs of faith. **Hope** drew the Holy Family back to Nazareth. **Hope** is the power of God flowing into parents who sometimes walk hundreds of miles in search of peace and freedom in another country, much like so many of our ancestors. As I see things right now, **hope** in God’s power is what will heal the anger and hatred in this country. That may mean some can only pray. Others may make signs and march to revivify awareness of the Common Good stressed by Pope Francis. Still others will bravely proclaim the Kingdom like Peter, Paul and the earliest believers who offered **hope** from the tyranny of the Roman Empire. We have myriad examples of **hope** throughout all of our Judaeo-Christian history.



Twice upon a time I set this passage of Jeremiah 29 to music: *For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, plans for your welfare so as to give you a future of **hope**. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart.* Once upon a time a very close friend asked me a question when I was in a very dark place in life. She said: “Has God ever disappointed you?” It took some time to answer in my heart but it was a resounding “NO”. I believe an essential element of **hope** is **trust**, trust that God will do what God does - and God only does what is good.

I’ve lived here at St. Peter’s for 32 years now and cannot tell you how many times we’ve sweat blood because of money problems, Church politics (yes, they do exist), political mayhem (we’re across the street from City Hall) and myriad other sources of anxiety. Yet here we are, still at 110 West Madison, recovered from the Plague of 2020 and headed into the future with the promise Jeremiah gave his people in Babylonian captivity. So if you’re overwhelmed by what’s happening to our country or your health, your family – **trust** that God will *give us a future of **hope***. The Eucharist is the greatest sign that God is always with us, as his Son comes in humility to gather us into his one Body and to bring us into the future with **hope**! I ask you that same question: has God ever disappointed you?

Thank you sincerely for the love, support and care you show us all year long. We cannot do what we do as friars without all you give us. Remember – you’re never without out prayer support every single day. In this Jubilee Year of **HOPE**, may you trust completely in God’s grace and may God, in turn, fill you with peace, goodness and light. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*