

“Chipotle, We Have a Problem”  
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On February 7, 2011, Reuters News Service reported that the popular restaurant chain Chipotle Mexican Grill has become a target of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) “notices of inspection” regarding the legal status of their labor force. In the state of Minnesota, this federal crackdown on Chipotle has forced the chain to look at firing more than half of its employees --“as many as 700 of its estimated 1200 Minnesota workers.” (Baertlein, et al.) This crackdown comes as a result of a shift in government policy that has turned away from the huge raids that occurred under the Bush presidency to so-called “I-9 audits” under the Obama administration, in which employers must produce the employment eligibility verification forms (I-9s) for their respective employees. The majority of these ICE audits have been targeted at the restaurant and fast-food industry, undoubtedly because “immigrants—both legal and illegal—account for about a quarter of workers [in these industries]...and their numbers are up in recent years.” (Baertlein, et al.) The actual number of immigrants employed in this sector was estimated at 1.8 million in 2010.

The Co-Chief Executive of Chipotle, Monty Moran, has pledged the company’s full cooperation and insists that it does everything it can to screen its employees and review all documents presented to the hiring managers. In reaction to this investigation, Moran said that “this incident has caused a lot of disruption—both to us and in the lives of so many of our people. In addition, it’s been a heartbreaking situation for us to lose so many excellent employees.” (Baertlein, et al.) As for the employees themselves, the Reuters article included interviews with two of the dismissed workers, both of whom indicated that they will probably find jobs at other restaurants or factories in the Minneapolis area.

In light of this story, then, we might ask, “So who wins in this situation?” Not the restaurant chain, since they will have to fire large numbers of employees and hope to find new workers who will be willing to accept low wages and meager benefits in exchange for the physically demanding requirements of their jobs. Not the Latino employees, since they have to live in constant fear of being fired or deported or exploited by unscrupulous employers--or face the prospect of going back to their home countries where there are no jobs with livable wages. And not the government, since the fired workers will not be convinced to leave the country, knowing that someone else will be willing to hire them, and that employers are often willing to pay ICE fines which they see as a small price to pay in exchange for reliable workers (“Total ICE fines last year were a paltry \$7 million.” Baertlein, et al).

This scenario presents a microcosm of the larger issue of the economics of immigration and the lack of will on the part of our federally elected officials to implement meaningful immigration reform. The Republicans tend to vote as a block on issues related to immigration enforcement; for example, more money for the border fence and border security because their constituents by and large demand a more secure border (or at least the illusion that they are secure). The Democrats tend to vote for issues related to immigration reform (e.g., the DREAM Act) because their constituents tend to include Hispanic and other minority voters. The issue is now intensifying as Arizona and twenty-five other states are considering legislation that would allow law enforcement officials to demand proof of citizenship from anyone within their borders. Some legislators admit that they feel uncomfortable with the premise because it looks like racial profiling, but they also express desperation because of the federal government’s lack of action on this issue. (Johnson) But such legislation only addresses the visible symptom: the growing presence of immigrants in communities and states previously unaccustomed to and unprepared for significant numbers of (Latino) immigrants.

However, the root causes behind this wave of immigration go much deeper: the so-called “push-pull” factors of crushing poverty in the immigrants’ homelands, the political and/or economic instability produced by US foreign

policy decisions that disrupted the continued peaceful development of those nations (e.g. the US government support of right-wing dictators in several Central American nations in the 1970s and 80s), and the disruption of economic development (particularly to Mexican agriculture) that resulted from the implementation of NAFTA in the 1990s (Polaski). When we add to this the compelling vision of the American standard of living, the impact of globalization, the lack of accountability prevalent in many Latin American governments, and the inherent hypocrisy in our immigration policy that tells immigrants they're not allowed to come in illegally but then looks the other way when employers continually hire them—we understand how the immigrants might feel that they are merely expendable pawns in an international political and economic chess game.

But what are we as Christians to do? In order to gain another perspective, consider these two quotes, both excerpts from the Congressional Record:

*(May 2, 2002): "Mr. Speaker,...it would be important to state for the record that [the Congressman's] efforts ...have almost singularly awakened the conscience of the people of the United States of America about the plight and the humanitarian crisis and the moral bankruptcy of the government of Sudan."*

*(September 10, 2002): "The face of illegal immigration on our borders is one of murder, one of drug smuggling, one of vandalism for all the communities along the border, and one of infiltration of people coming into this country for purposes to do us great harm. ...I cannot think of a way to describe it except to say we are under siege, that there is an invasion."*

The first quote was uttered by Republican Congressman Mike Pence of Indiana, describing the extraordinary efforts of his colleague, Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo of Colorado, to address the humanitarian crisis in the Sudan. The second quote is from Congressman Tancredo himself, on the topic of illegal immigration from Mexico. Mr. Tancredo is a self-professed evangelical Christian, a faithful member of a church affiliated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. So why the economic, political, and humanitarian plight of one people group deserves his compassion while another apparently provokes fear and disgust, is unsettling, to say the least. One answer to this apparent paradox may lie in the fact that, although the US government has a policy for recognizing **political** refugees, those who seek asylum based on "a well-founded fear of persecution" such as Sudanese refugees, there does not presently exist in US law or in the international legal order, any recognition of the status of **economic** refugees (those who emigrate to escape economic oppression), even though they comprise the largest immigrant group anywhere in the world (Gabor and Rosenquest, 281). At the same time, while it would be wrong to attribute motives to Mr. Tancredo's actions and opinions, one might speculate that his views also mirror those of the voters of the Sixth District of Colorado, voters concerned about perceived increased crime rates or unemployment in their state. In such a scenario, the plight of Mexican and other immigrants again leaves them as expendable campaign fodder, especially if they have no voice or vote.

As Christians, we need to be aware first of all of the dynamics that have produced the issue of illegal immigration in our country and acknowledge our own government's policy shortcomings, past and present. Secondly, we need to balance justice and compassion as we consider the plight of immigrants in our country and around the world. Scripture reminds us that we are all sojourners here on earth and that our true citizenship is with God's kingdom, not earthly allegiances. It also reminds us in the book of James that we should not be 'respecters of persons' and judge some people as more valuable than others. All people are created in God's image and thus have infinite value and worth, whether they live on the other side of the world or on the other side of town. Finally, we need to be the voice of the voiceless and urge our representatives to break down party walls, forget about being concerned only with what will get them re-elected, and to work for: 1) just and fair

foreign trade and diplomatic policies; 2) humanitarian immigration enforcement and 3) meaningful immigration reform that allows immigrants to maintain their dignity and to live decently and without fear.

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