

SOCIAL SIN AND IMMIGRATION: GOOD FENCES MAKE BAD NEIGHBORS

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The category of social sin elucidates the connection between unjust structures that contribute to undocumented immigration and pervasive ideologies that foster resistance to reform efforts and immigrants themselves. Following an exploration of the development of social sin by Pope John Paul II and Latin American liberation theologians, the author advances a conception of social sin that accounts for its personal, institutional, and nonvoluntary dimensions. The analysis seeks to clarify intersecting levels of inhospitality and injustice.

RECENT CASUALTIES of unjust immigration policies and practices include a significant increase in border deaths and smuggling networks, prolonged family separation, harmful raids, and the creation of an underclass.¹ By contrast, commitments to welcoming the vulnerable and fostering solidarity ground a Catholic immigration ethic, manifest in pastoral care and social services for immigrant populations and advocacy for humane immigration reform. In the U.S. context, many citizens, Roman Catholics included, remain ambivalent about, if not resistant to, an ethic that urges hospitality and mercy for those who cross or remain within their borders through extralegal avenues.²

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² A recent study conducted by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Hispanic Center, "America's Immigration Quandary: No Consensus

A variety of factors has contributed to the present situation of an estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States, including a significant disparity between labor needs and legal avenues for low wage work, deepening poverty in sending countries, and backlogs in the family reunification categories of an outmoded visa system. Immigration as a problem of social policy involves intersecting legal, political, and economic considerations regarding labor, border security, trade policy, cultural integration, and criminal justice. As presently framed, the immigration quandary pits the interests of different constituencies against one another: native and foreign-born workers, industry and organized labor, cultural conservatives and social justice advocates, even different generations of immigrants. The reality of undocumented immigration remains a complex matter. Legitimate concerns regarding disproportionate burdens on local social services and the need to set workable limits and procedures for border protocol understandably persist. Moreover, attitudes of hostility or hospitality toward undocumented immigrants can be distinguished from reasonable disagreement over a workable policy solution. This article undertakes a theological reflection on obstacles to policy resolution, given the tepid embrace of a Catholic immigration ethic by many in the United States. Without dismissing concerns about the complex relationship between law and morality or the political involvement of churches, fierce resistance to a Catholic ethic of hospitality with the concomitant “casualties” of the prevailing position may suggest Catholic citizens’ susceptibility to secular (dis)values.

The etymology of “conscience” (knowing together with) highlights the social dimension of moral knowledge, for “convictions of conscience are shaped, and moral obligations are learned, within the communities that influence us.”³ Adherents’ divergent positions on social and political issues

on Immigration Problem or Proposed Fixes,” shows that, despite the strong pro-immigrant statements issued by prominent religious leaders, large segments of the public—including many Catholics—harbor serious concerns about immigrants and immigration. The study concludes that while white Christians, including Catholics, are generally slightly less pro-immigrant than secular counterparts (but similar to the population at large), those more regularly attending church are more likely to agree with church leaders’ more hospitable positions. See Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “America’s Immigration Quandary: No Consensus on Immigration Problem or Proposed Fixes” (Washington: Pew Research Center for People and the Press and Pew Hispanic Center, 2006), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/63.pdf>. Unless indicated otherwise, this and all other URLs cited in this article were accessed on January 21, 2010.

³ Richard M. Gula, “The Moral Conscience,” in *Conscience, Readings in Moral Theology No. 14*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004) 51–64 at 54–55. I am grateful to Paul Crowley, Jonathan Rothchild, and Tracy Tiemeier whose input helped me reframe this aspect of the article.

within religious communities raise questions not only about the adequacy of ecclesial teaching on evolving moral issues,⁴ but also about spheres of influence and discernment. Recent research on Catholic voting patterns suggests that, increasingly, religious affiliation does not significantly influence voting behavior. In the privacy of the voting booth, one's tax bracket, cultural assumptions, or party loyalty may take priority over religious or moral formation on social issues.⁵ As Mark O'Keefe has written, "constituted in part by his or her social relationships, the person generally will appropriate uncritically the prevailing values of a culture—even though from an objective standpoint an outsider may see quite readily that the prevailing hierarchy of values is seriously disordered."⁶ Hence the cultural forces that perpetuate myths about immigrants and that consistently elevate economic and security concerns above moral ones may wield significant influence. This use of anti-immigrant sentiment as smokescreen to divert attention from needed reforms and the scapegoating of undocumented immigrants for economic and security woes threaten to deafen citizen-disciples to gospel calls for hospitality and justice. Such phenomena elucidate the many "fences," both physical and ideological, that U.S. citizens construct to exclude and protect but that impact immigrant populations.⁷ Increasingly within our communities, legal, social, and cultural borders have become fault lines that jeopardize common welfare.

⁴ For a thoughtful discussion on the topic of the reception of Catholic moral teachings and the Spirit's "grace of self-doubt" as essential to all co-believers' participation in moral discernment, see Margaret A. Farley, "Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt," in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy E. O'Connell and Thomas A. Shannon, eds. (Washington: Georgetown University, 2002) 55–76. With respect to Catholic teaching on immigration in particular, as William O'Neill rightly points out, it is "far from a panacea." Its commitment to human rights "leaves many questions unresolved" yet offers "considerable wisdom" in the face of present practices and rhetoric. See William R. O'Neill, S.J., "A Little Common Sense: The Ethics of Immigration in Catholic Social Teaching," *Explore: An Examination of the Catholic Identity and Ignatian Character in Jesuit Higher Education* 11.2 (2008) 10–14, at 12.

⁵ See, e.g., Matthew Streb and Brian Fredericks, "The Myth of a Distinct Catholic Vote," and Mark M. Gray and Mary E. Bendyna, R.S.M., "Between Church, Party, and Conscience: Attitudes Concerning Protecting Life and Promoting Social Justice among U.S. Catholics," in *Catholics and Politics: Dynamic Tensions between Faith and Power*, ed. Kristin Heyer, Mark Rozell, and Michael Genovese (Washington: Georgetown University, 2008) 93–112 and 75–92.

⁶ Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., "Social Sin and Fundamental Option," in *Christian Freedom: Essays by the Faculty of the Saint Meinrad School of Theology*, ed. Clayton N. Jefford (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 131–43, at 135.

⁷ In this article I use "ideology" in the sense of a dominant cultural ideology, a framing vision that claims objectivity and potentially distorts perceptions of reality.

In articulating a theology of migration, Gioacchino Campese suggests that from an epistemologically privileged perspective of undocumented migrants, “theology must read the reality of migration and uncover the presence of God within that reality.”⁸ My article considers the sinful practices that both characterize the realities of migration and at the same time conceal the face of God, as these practices impede our grasp of authentic values.⁹ I argue that the theological concept of social sin can assist Christians in arriving at a more fruitful understanding of and response to these dynamics of influence. Social sin serves as a conceptual key to revealing the socioeconomic, legal, and political structures that contribute to undocumented immigration, as well as to understanding the ideological blinders that foster resistance to an ethic of hospitality and to immigrants themselves. The following analysis explores the development of the category of social sin, particularly its articulations by Pope John Paul II and Latin American liberation theologians, to arrive at a comprehensive and dialectical conception of social sin. I contend that an understanding of social sin that accounts for its personal, institutional, and nonvoluntary dimensions illuminates the relationship between pervasive ideologies regarding the undocumented and unjust structures that impact their vulnerability. Because social sin demands both personal conversion and social transformation, the article concludes with an ecclesial model of response to undocumented immigration that exemplifies a multidimensional approach in light of the foregoing analysis.

SOCIAL SIN AND IMMIGRATION: AN OVERVIEW

In its broadest sense social sin encompasses the unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanization.¹⁰ According to Peter Henriot, social sin attempts to identify and interpret structural injustice. Such systemic sinfulness may take the form of structures that violate human dignity, stifle freedom, or impose gross inequality; situations that promote or facilitate individual selfishness; or “the complicity of silent acquiescence in social

For a discussion of a more neutral sense of the term and its relationship to faith, see Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books) 1984.

⁸ Gioacchino Campese, “Beyond Ethnic and National Imagination: Toward a Catholic Theology of U.S. Immigration,” in *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*, ed. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University, 2007) 175–90, at 181.

⁹ O’Keefe, “Social Sin and Fundamental Option” 141.

¹⁰ While the focus of this inquiry is Roman Catholic theological understandings of social sin, given its objective of clarifying Catholic resistance to ecclesial teaching on immigration, Protestant parallels in concepts like Walter Rauschenbusch’s structures of evil or Reinhold Niebuhr’s collective egotism remain relevant as well.

injustice.”¹¹ Hence Kenneth Himes has characterized social sin as “the disvalue . . . embedded in a pattern of societal organization and cultural understanding,” such as systemic racism, sexism, or imperialism.¹² Theologians differ on the precise scope of social sin, from limiting it to the effects or embodiment of personal sin, to an expansive sense of all sin as primarily social, with personal sins as mere manifestations of social sin.¹³ The discussion of social sin herein relies upon a distinction between personal or actual sin, understood as free and conscious acts that oppose moral norms, God’s law, and conscience, and sin of the world, understood as a synthesis of the consequences of original sin over time throughout human history, including the imprint of sin on human hearts, structures, and environments.¹⁴

Certainly a fundamentally social anthropology and the covenantal context of sin were not novel theological developments at the advent of Catholic articulations of social sin around the time of Vatican II. Biblical scholarship on sin in John and Paul has long understood sin more as a state or condition than as an act of transgression. In his Gospel, John uses the “world” to describe, as Himes puts it, “that hard-hearted state of existence within which one becomes enmeshed upon entrance into life, life that is lived in darkness rather than the light.”¹⁵ Moreover the social situation of original sin essentially constitutes a state that facilitates individual sinfulness.¹⁶ Yet, until recent decades, the Catholic moral tradition has neglected, if not resisted, a social understanding of sin due in part to an individualistic, act-oriented approach in traditional moral theology and a legalistic approach to questions of social justice.¹⁷ During the 1960s Latin American liberation theology and German political theology criticized the traditional focus on private virtue in light of the social dimension of the Christian message.¹⁸ In the sections that follow, I trace the subsequent development of social sin in

¹¹ Peter J. Henriot, “Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition,” in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Easton Whitehead (New York: Seabury, 1980) 127–44, at 128–29.

¹² Kenneth R. Himes, “Social Sin and the Role of the Individual,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 6 (1986) 183–218, at 184.

¹³ For an overview of this range of understandings see Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* (New York: Paulist, 1990).

¹⁴ John Paul II discusses these traditional distinctions in his “The Sin of Man and the Sin of the World,” General Audience of November 5, 1986. Unless otherwise indicated, this and all other Vatican documents cited in this article are available on the Vatican Web site: <http://www.vatican.va>.

¹⁵ Kenneth R. Himes, “Human Failing: The Meanings and Metaphors of Sin,” in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues; Festschrift for James P. Hanigan*, ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist, 2004) 145–61, at 153.

¹⁶ Henriot, “Social Sin” 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 135.

¹⁸ Gregory Baum, “Structures of Sin,” in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical On Social Concern*, ed. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 110–26, at 111.

magisterial teachings and Latin American liberation theology in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of how the concept illuminates receptivity to a Catholic immigration ethic.

A Magisterial Understanding of Social Sin: The Legacy of John Paul II

According to post-Vatican II magisterial teaching, social sin is primarily understood as the sum total of personal choices toward evil. John Paul II's development of the category of social sin during his papacy broadened and enriched the Church's moral teaching and equipped the Church to better name and respond to societal injustices. A brief overview of his use of the concept indicates his emphasis on the derivative nature of social sin and his interest in theologically circumscribing its meaning; he holds that a situation or structure, although it can be unjust, cannot in itself sin, since it lacks personal free will and thus moral agency.

John Paul II's development of the category from his introduction of a deprivatized notion of sin in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (1984) through later social encyclicals departs from the individualistic conception(s) of sin pervasive in the neo-Scholastic moral theology manuals.¹⁹ Nevertheless he consistently seeks to circumscribe social sin theologically due to a concern that social sin risks diminishing individual accountability and an insistence that the category may only be understood as sin analogously, since structures cannot sin or accrue guilt. As John Langan puts it, "It is clear that for John Paul II personal sin remains the fundamental category, and the notion of structures of sin is secondary and derivative both in terms of our thinking about our situation and our actions to transform it."²⁰ The pope's "wary openness" to the idea of social sin becomes clear even as his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* introduces the "most detailed recognition of the concept extant to the time,"²¹ its first explicit use in a document "bearing authoritative weight for the whole church" and representing "a significant exercise of the ordinary universal magisterium."²² Here John Paul articulates three understandings of social sin: first, due to human solidarity each individual's actions impact others, hence "every sin

¹⁹ Norbert Rigali, "Human Solidarity and Sin in the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*," *Living Light* 21 (1985) 337–43, at 339.

²⁰ John Langan, S.J., "Personal Responsibility and the Common Good in John Paul II," in *Ethics, Religion, and the Good Society: New Directions in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Joseph Runzo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 132–52, at 135.

²¹ Adam A. J. Deville, "The Development of the Doctrine of 'Structural Sin' and a 'Culture of Death' in the Thought of Pope John Paul II," *Église et Théologie* 30 (1999) 307–25, at 309.

²² Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 132–52, at 141

can undoubtedly be considered as social sin”; second, some sins “by their very matter constitute a direct attack on one’s neighbor,” whether sins of commission or omission; and third, “social sin refers to the relationships between the various human communities.”²³

Even as he grounds this concept of sin in a social anthropology, the pope emphasizes a primarily personal conception of sin, stressing that, while an individual may be conditioned by external factors or habits, “sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act, since it is an act of freedom on the part of an individual person and not properly of a group or community”; at base “there is nothing so personal and untransferable in each individual as merit for virtue or responsibility for sin.”²⁴ When he moves to the third dimension of social sin (that of communities’ relationships), the pope remains at pains to emphasize personal accountability and the analogical nature of social sin, cautioning that even analogically sinful social phenomena “must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved.” His language constraining the concept’s legitimate use is pointed:

Having said this in the clearest and most unequivocal way, one must add at once that there is one meaning sometimes given to social sin that is not legitimate or acceptable even though it is very common in certain quarters today. This usage contrasts social sin and personal sin, not without ambiguity, in a way that leads more or less unconsciously to the *watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin*, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibilities. . . . Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. . . . The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.²⁵

For John Paul, social sin remains fundamentally personal because a situation or institution is not properly the subject of moral acts. Hence, underscoring the ineffectiveness of structural transformation (via law or force) without personal conversion, he stresses his contention that “at the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people.”²⁶

As Margaret Pfeil rightly points out—concerning texts issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on either side of *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*—“the aim . . . is not to explore the pastoral dimensions which gave rise to the language of social sin, but rather to circumscribe its use theologically.”²⁷ For example, in the first CDF instruction addressing Latin American liberation theology in light of its perceived appropriation of Marxist elements, the CDF stresses the consequential rather than causal nature of

²³ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* no. 16, Apostolic Exhortation of December 2, 1984.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* no. 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

²⁷ Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications” 141.

structures: “To be sure, there are structures which are evil and which cause evil and which we must have the courage to change. Structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man’s actions. . . . The root of evil, then, lies in free and responsible persons.”²⁸ Likewise John Paul emphasizes social sin’s analogical nature since it is impossible to “delimit the component personal sins” in social sin to “apportion responsibility and guilt.”²⁹ The second CDF instruction (in 1986) does acknowledge the “fixed and fossilized” nature of some institutions and practices that harm human dignity.³⁰ Nevertheless Norbert Rigali notes that “nowhere in John Paul’s theology is the social character of sin separated from personal responsibility.” Rigali goes on to observe that, “without denying that social sins, in derivative senses, are aggregates of personal sins, one can ask whether they are not also particular expressions of the mysterious communion of sin in which all humanity is united.”³¹

The following year, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), John Paul gives more attention to structural realities, yet reemphasizes their rootedness in concrete individual acts.³² Whereas his statements that imperialistic ideologies give the impression of creating personal and institutional obstacles demonstrate some recognition of such ideologies’ “blinding effects” and “the almost automatic operation of economic and political institutions,” his acknowledgement of this nonvoluntary dimension of social sin remains in tension with his significant emphasis on personal responsibility.³³ In the

²⁸ CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation” no. 15, *Origins* 14 (1984) 194–204.

²⁹ As the pope notes, “If one may and must speak in an analogical sense about social sin, and also about structural sin—since sin is properly an act of the person—for us, as pastors and theologians, the following problem arises: Which penance and which social reconciliation must correspond to this *analogical* sin?” (John Paul II, “The Value of This Collegial Body,” *Synod of Bishops: Penance and Reconciliation in the Mission of the Church* [Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1984] 65, emphasis original; cited in Pfeil “Doctrinal Implications” 139).

³⁰ “These are sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create, on the national and international level, and which orient or organize economic, social and political life. Being necessary in themselves, they often tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby paralyzing or distorting social development and causing injustice” (CDF, *Libertatis conscientia*, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, no. 74).

³¹ Rigali, “Human Solidarity and Sin” 341, 344.

³² See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (December 30, 1987) no. 36.

³³ Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications” 143, relying upon Baum, “Structures of Sin” 115. John Paul II suggests the dominant ideologies of “liberal capitalism” and “Marxist collectivism” blinds participants from recognizing the faults of their own systems. See Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 193. Charles Curran rightly points out that the pope’s emphasis on personal moral agency as contributing to social sin reflects his entire philosophical and theological approach of personalism, with its emphasis on “the primacy of the subject over the

encyclical structural sins denote institutional realities that “create an unjust distribution of wealth, power, and recognition, and thus push a section of the population to the margin of society where their well-being or even their life is in danger.”³⁴ When the pope identifies the absolutizing human attitudes of “the all-consuming desire for profit” and “the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one’s will upon others” to which nations and blocs are prone, his articulation holds potential for expanding beyond a derivative notion of social sin. He writes: “If certain forms of modern ‘imperialism’ were considered in the light of these moral criteria, we would see that hidden behind certain decisions, apparently inspired only by economics or politics, are real forms of idolatry: of money, ideology, class, technology.”³⁵

Acknowledgement of the more nonvoluntary aspects of social sin—e.g., the impact ideologies have on personal agency—also surfaces in John Paul’s references in subsequent encyclicals to humans’ social conditioning: he identifies the ways structures of sin impede full human development (although “decisions” create such environments)³⁶ through, for example, a “culture of death” that forms the context for individual responsibility with respect to abortion and other sins.³⁷ In *Evangelium vitae* the pope discusses four particular roots of the culture of death, two of which signify a more expansive understanding of social sin: the “eclipse of the sense of God and of man inevitably leads to a practical materialism, individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism,” and the “darkening of the human conscience both individually and in society—a confusion about good and evil that encourages the culture of death and consolidates structures of sin.”³⁸ Given these indications, the pope’s emphasis on personal agency should also be understood within the context of his appreciation of the power that culture exerts, as evident in his description of the dramatic conflict between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death” in *Evangelium vitae*.³⁹

object, labor over capital, and the need for all to participate responsibly in economic and political institutions and structures” (Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* [Washington: Georgetown University, 2005] 83).

³⁴ Baum, “Structures of Sin” 112.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 37. Nevertheless his emphasis remains on the side of individual responsibility even as structural injustice and ideologies receive greater attention. Baum concludes that John Paul was “aware of the unconscious, nonvoluntary, quasi-automatic dimension of social sin,” that he recognized “the power of ideology,” and yet that “the greater emphasis in his analysis of social sin lies on personal responsibility” (Baum, “Structures of Sin” 115).

³⁶ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (May 1, 1991) no. 38.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995) no. 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.* nos. 23–24; see also Curran, *Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* 14–15.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 50; see also Curran, *Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* 85.

In the recent *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reiterates John Paul II's primary understanding that "at the bottom of every situation of sin there is always the individual who sins," since "in its true sense, sin is always an act of the person because it is the free act of an individual person and not properly speaking of a group or community."⁴⁰ Hence the pope advances the concept of social sin and elaborates its meaning over his corpus, yet his theological circumscription of the category to underscore individual responsibility reflected in contemporary magisterial articulations constrains its value for uncovering the subtle social dynamics that impact personal agency. His retention of the individual's role in sustaining sinful structures is significant and valuable for a consideration of subjective inhospitality to immigrants, yet the primacy of this personal dimension remains incomplete. In part his gradual expansion of the term's scope and meaning results from his indebtedness to the experience and theologies arising out of the church of Latin America, as I will show below.

Social sin as elaborated by John Paul II also holds potential for identifying structures of injustice that contribute to contemporary patterns of undocumented migration and opportunistic interdependence among neighboring nations in the Americas. Yet the magisterial constraint of social sin limits efforts fully to unmask nonvoluntary dimensions of opposition to immigration teaching. In recent years moral theologians have increasingly called into question the isolation of personal acts and spheres of morality from their social contexts.⁴¹ Whereas social sin may not directly *cause* personal sin or a reversal of one's fundamental option, it "creates an environment in which it becomes more difficult to make good choices," heightening the tendency "present because of original sin to turn away

⁴⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004) no. 117. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Bantam Double Day, 1995) no. 1869 puts it this way: "'Structures of sin' are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a 'social sin.'"

⁴¹ Christine Gudorf rightly suggests that the complex relationship of social structures to individuals casts doubt on the adequacy of traditional understandings of human behavior that focus on the interaction between a predisposition to sin and the strength of the individual will or mind: "Many persons have come to see how inevitably and decisively humans are anchored in the concrete material world, how complex are the levels, structures and systems affecting interaction in that world, and how influential those structures and systems seem to be in human behavior" (Christine E. Gudorf, "Admonishing Sinners: Owning Structural Sin," in *Rethinking the Spiritual Works of Mercy*, ed. Francis A. Eigo, O.S.A. [Villanova, Pa: Villanova University, 1993] 1–29, at 3). Below I return to the influence of sociological understandings of the nature and role of structures on a comprehensive view of social sin.

from God.”⁴² Hence as Lisa Sowle Cahill recently cautioned, “All moral theology must take into account not only individual choices but the practices and institutions in which agency takes shape.”⁴³

Magisterial understandings of social sin both benefit from and are defined against Latin American liberation theological articulations of the concept. Gregory Baum points out that John Paul’s discussion of social sin remains less sensitive than the Medellín teachings to the unconscious dimension of social sin and the impact unjust structures have on personal agency. The blindness produced by the very patterns the pope identifies has relevance for an adequate understanding of the scope and responsibility for sin; such blindness can prevent recognition, since exploitative institutions and structures are both sustained by the appearance of legitimacy and “tend to create a culture of conformity and passivity.” Hence, as long as ignorance, nonrecognition, and ideological prisons hold sway, “there is no critical freedom and hence no personal sin in the strict sense.”⁴⁴ My own concern here lies less with the viability of institutional culpability or vincible ignorance per se, and more with the ways the category of social sin helps us consider the connections between the structural injustices John Paul identifies and more nonvoluntary, ideological influences that abet and result from communal actions. Baum has helpfully distinguished between “guilt by personal implication” and “guilt by common heritage” in terms of the relative levels of freedom with which people participate in structural sin and thereby incur guilt.⁴⁵ The nonvoluntary dimension of social sin holds considerable potential for unmasking the ideological and subconscious dynamics at play in resisting hospitality to immigrants. It is to the contributions of Latin American liberation theologians in this regard that I now turn.⁴⁶

Liberation Theology and Social Sin: Institutionalized Violence and Ideological Blindness

Latin American liberation theology articulates a framework that explicitly addresses both voluntary and nonvoluntary dimensions of social sin; in the

⁴² O’Keefe, “Social Sin and Fundamental Option” 142.

⁴³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Moral Theology: From Evolutionary to Revolutionary Change,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics*, ed. James F. Keenan, S.J. (New York: Continuum, 2007) 221–27, at 222.

⁴⁴ Baum, “Structures of Sin” 113–14.

⁴⁵ Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* 198–201.

⁴⁶ John Paul II’s elaboration of social sin ensued in tandem with and, in some instances, in direct response to the development of the category by Latin American liberation theologians. The two conceptions are not presented here in any chronological order but rather indicate distinct theoretical frameworks and contexts developed within recent Catholic tradition.

case of immigration, it thus incorporates both the reality of the unjust institutions that contribute to border crossings and ideologies and symbolic systems that perpetuate blindness to such realities. Without downplaying the personal dimensions of sin that magisterial articulations emphasize, liberation theologians employ structural sin more expansively to describe “cultural and political patterns inherited from the colonial past, or economic and social practices resulting from Latin America’s role in global capitalism.”⁴⁷ In contrast to the magisterial approach, liberation theologians write less out of a concern for safeguarding continuity with the theological tradition and more out of a primarily pastoral concern for distinctive contexts.⁴⁸

The adoption of the language of social sin in liberation theology emerged with the 1968 Medellín, Colombia, conference where the Latin American bishops explicitly identified their reality as a sinful situation of institutionalized violence rooted in “the oppressive structures that come from the abuse of ownership and of power and from exploitation of works or from unjust transactions.”⁴⁹ For example, the historical concentration of nearly all arable land, wealth, and political power into hands of “the Fourteen Families” in El Salvador (and similar oligarchies in other countries) created structures of sin that resulted in utter disenfranchisement of *campesinos*. The exploitation of indigenous populations throughout Latin America (and in Mexico in particular) forced to work in gold and silver mines during the colonial era, or more recent efforts to lure foreign investors to the region via free trade zones have resulted in structures of violence distinguished by poverty wages, dire working conditions, environmental exploitation, and antiunion business practices.

The 1979 gathering of Latin American bishops (CELAM) at Puebla, Mexico, underscored the Medellín assessment, while attending more to the relationship between personal and structural sin. Here the bishops discussed ways in which personal sin gets mirrored in unjust interpersonal relations and situations that enslave and diminish freedom.⁵⁰ As José Ignacio González

⁴⁷ Kenneth R. Himes, “Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008) 228–41, at 237.

⁴⁸ Latin American bishops did not intend to undermine the significance of this theological tradition (such as the role of personal agency in formal sin), but were concerned to highlight the connections between sin and structural injustice in their context(s). See Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications” 137–38. Also, it is worth acknowledging that references to social sin by John Paul II and the CDF were in part precisely aimed at responding to perceived or potential misuse by Latin American liberation theologians.

⁴⁹ CELAM, “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council” (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1973) 78, 49.

⁵⁰ CELAM, “Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America” (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979) 328. In their words,

Faus summarizes the distinctive teaching of the two CELAM assemblies on the subject: "When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, make human beings sin."⁵¹ This conception presents a more expansive understanding of social sin than one that remains only derivatively social. Whereas some liberation theologians employ a social theory that focuses disproportionately on one sense of sin to the detriment of the other, the norm consists in a more balanced approach, in which the powerful external forces shaping and obstructing the path to personal conversion are emphasized without excluding Christian hope in transformation.

This approach is rooted in a communitarian social theory that emphasizes the multiple institutions that simultaneously implicate and influence individuals, whether familial, professional, economic, civic, religious, or otherwise. As a result of persons' participation in these complex interrelationships, the community and its governing structures more readily engender a series of situations that necessitate behaviors that favor and multiply individual greed. Hence "the human community is always more than the sum of individual human beings," and "evil, like the human being, is never just personal, although it is personal."⁵² Liberation theologians root their analysis of sin in this social theory, particularly sin as they see it manifested in the grave injustice of their historical context. At base a Catholic theological anthropology that counters a view of humans as autonomous cells unconditioned by their interactive experiences challenges an insistence that sin be considered chiefly from the narrow perspective of an autonomous will.

Hence, on this view, both institutions and ideologies created and sustained by persons *and* persons shaped by institutions and ideologies are guilty of sin and therefore in need of transformation. The structural inequality between the United States and its Latin American neighbors, in its historical roots and maintenance in laws and institutions, constitutes objective sin. Conversely, subjective sin resides in the choice, once aware of this inequality and its dehumanization, to refuse hospitality to its victims or to continue to opt for lifestyles and political programs that maintain an unjust disequilibrium. As Jon Sobrino notes, from the time of the Spanish and Portuguese conquests, the relationship between North and South has not substantially changed: "The poor countries are only important for what

"sin, a force making for breakdown and rupture, will always pose obstacles to growth in love and communion. It will always be operative, both within the hearts of human beings, and within the various structures which they have created and on which they have left the destructive imprint of their sinfulness" (281).

⁵¹ José Ignacio González Faus, "Sin," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 537.

⁵² *Ibid.* 536.

they can provide or—if there's no alternative—for what can be plundered from them: raw materials and cheap labor."⁵³

Whereas John Paul II was concerned that structures not be understood as “committing sin,”⁵⁴ Ignacio Ellacuría insists that structures do, however, “manifest and actualize the power of sin, thereby causing sin, by making it exceedingly difficult for men and women to lead the life that is rightfully theirs as daughters and sons of God.”⁵⁵ As Ellacuría notes, the sin of the world is “fundamentally historical and structural, communitarian and objective, at once the fruit and the cause of many other personal and collective sins, and its propagation and consolidation as the ongoing negation of the Reign of God.”⁵⁶ It is witness to this realm of the Johannine sin of the world or “hamartiosphere”⁵⁷ that leads Sobrino to speak of structural, objective sin as “the negative element of history,” or of the “idols of death” that draw persons to their worship and away from worship of the authentic God of life.⁵⁸ As the theoretical dialectic makes clear, however, objective sin cannot exist only in systems and structures; “these idols have particular agents who cause particular offenses.”⁵⁹ Idols and their adherents seek legitimation; the unjust act or situation is always accompanied by the lie, collective or individual, that seeks to offer its own self-serving logic and so obscure its reality as sin. Pervasive exploitation of undocumented laborers rests on a lie that humans are replaceable and not inherently worthy. In Sobrino's words, “sin and concealment go together, both

⁵³ Jon Sobrino, “Five Hundred Years: Structural Sin and Structural Grace,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 69–82, at 73.

⁵⁴ John Paul II maintains that institutions themselves cannot sin, as we have seen, yet his articulation of solidarity as a virtue for institutions suggests the potential for institutional vice or sinfulness in some sense, at least.

⁵⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría “Aporte de la teología de la liberación a las religiones abrahámicas en la superación del individualismo y del positivismo,” manuscript of an address to the Congress of Abrahamic Religions held at Córdoba, Spain, in February 1987, as cited by Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis* 355.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ José María González Ruiz understands “the ‘hamartiosphere,’ the sphere of sin [as] ‘a kind of parameter or structure which objectively conditions the progress of human history itself’” (see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] 194–95).

⁵⁸ Sobrino elaborates this concept in, among other of his writings, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 165–67; and “Latin America: Place of Sin and Place of Forgiveness,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* 58–68, at 58–60.

⁵⁹ Sobrino adds, “The great sin takes particular sin in these forms, and the idols are personalized in torturers and murderers” (Sobrino, “Latin America,” in *Principle of Mercy* 62).

personally and socially. And the size of that concealment is a measure of the sin."⁶⁰

If the magisterial understanding of social sin remains primarily personal or interpersonal, sin as blindness denotes a transpersonal sense of sin: "we live in sin as a people, and our collective sin is more than the sum of individual sins."⁶¹ Himes characterizes sin as collective blindness in terms of both "the ways in which our personal sin becomes incarnated in unjust social practices and institutions, as well as the power that these structures, having come into existence, exert upon us as heirs to the sins of those who have gone before us. We are inheritors of their faulty social arrangements."⁶² This nonvoluntary dimension of social sin, also understood in terms of scotosis⁶³ or false consciousness, is suggestive not only of the darkness of the state of original sin humans enter but also of the ways we are susceptible to a captivating environment or cultural blinders that prevent us from seeing rightly.⁶⁴ Whereas some debate the extent to which such blindness necessarily mitigates individual culpability, cultivated ignorance of the plight of others, the impact of our actions, or the effects of ideology cannot be summarily dismissed as outside the realm of moral responsibility.⁶⁵

Finally, a situation of social sinfulness continues to describe the countries of origin for most Latino immigrants in the United States today (77% of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico, Central, and South America).⁶⁶ The elements identified by CELAM in 1979, such as a lack of adequate housing, starvation wages, unemployment and underemployment, and compulsory mass migrations remain "a scandal and a contradiction to Christian existence" today.⁶⁷ The new norm of democratic governance that has emerged in subsequent decades, while improving upon military dictatorship, has done little to alleviate the scarcity that confronts the

⁶⁰ Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004) 41.

⁶¹ Himes, "Human Failing" 158. ⁶² *Ibid.* 159.

⁶³ For an overview of several scholars' discussion of this dimension of social sin as "knowing ignorance," including Bernard Lonergan's understanding of "scotosis" as an unconscious blocking of understanding and Bernard Häring's identification of sin as *skotos* or "darkness," see O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin* 36.

⁶⁴ See also Himes, "Human Failing" 159. Elsewhere he asserts: "Only with the removal of the ignorance which accompanies the blindness of social sin do we enter a world of moral responsibility" (Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual" 213–14).

⁶⁵ Here the traditional categories of vincible ignorance or culpable loss of freedom similarly indicate the responsibility to overturn rather than perpetuate social sins. See O'Keefe, "Social Sin and Fundamental Option" 140.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Pew Hispanic Center report (April 14, 2009) i, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>.

⁶⁷ CELAM, "Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America" 29.

poorest of the region. In El Salvador, for example, a country of nearly seven million people with four hundred attempting to depart for the United States daily, the share of national income received by the poorest 20% dropped from 3% in 1991, the last full year of the twelve-year civil year, to a mere 2.8% in 2002.⁶⁸ This reality reveals “the fact of the poor,” for whom “living is a slow approach to death because of unjust and oppressive economic and social structures.”⁶⁹ The bishops of Latin America identify this reality as sin and the product of sin; as such, the Catholic immigration stance engages enduring root causes and a global perspective rather than political expediency or narrow nationalism.

SOCIAL SIN AS INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMMIGRATION

Hence a more robust understanding of social sin emerges that highlights the relationship between personal and structural sin and suggests the inter-related nature of its structural and ideological dimensions. John Paul II’s legacy indicates the significance of carefully incorporating novel theological categories into the tradition and guards against downplaying individual culpability in sinful situations. Latin American liberation theology elucidates how personal will and culpability are interconnected with social injustice and institutional sin. Whereas magisterial documents have emphasized the voluntary aspect of social sin, Latin American liberation theology has stressed its nonvoluntary dimensions.⁷⁰ Rather than succumbing to either the fear that social sin risks downplaying personal responsibility or the idea that virtually all sin is social and that personal sin is simply a manifestation of this primarily social form of sin, the accounts traced above help elucidate more of a dialectical relationship between personal and social sin. Structures are then both consequential and causal in nature, and we are subjectively responsible for sinful situations yet remain subject to external influences. This more holistic understanding has significant bearing on the topic of receptivity to an ethic of hospitality: that is, the socioeconomic, legal, and political structures that lead to undocumented immigration are connected to the ideological blinders that obstruct hospitality to immigrants.

⁶⁸ U.S. Agency for International Development, “USAID Budget: El Salvador” (FY 2005), <http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2005/lac/sv.html>.

⁶⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Sanctuary: A Theological Analysis,” trans. Walter Petry Jr., *Cross Currents* 38.2 (Summer 1988) 164–72, at 165. The phenomenon of poverty as structural violence is evident in a variety of global contexts, yet the reality remains equally urgent in the Latin American context and hence for the majority of recent immigrant arrivals to the United States.

⁷⁰ Baum, “Structures of Sin” 116–17.

Building upon sociological understandings of internalized structures,⁷¹ several theologians have articulated stages of social sin that shed light on the relationship between its voluntary and nonvoluntary dimensions. For example, Baum outlines four levels of social sin: (1) unjust institutions and dehumanizing trends built into various institutions that embody people's collective life; (2) operative cultural and religious ideologies or symbolic systems fostered by society that legitimate unjust situations and intensify harm; (3) the level of false consciousness or blindness created by these institutions or ideologies that convince people that their actions are good and lead to collective destructive action (I would include at this level what Henriot has characterized as the complicity of silent acquiescence); and (4) collective decisions made by distorted consciousness that increases injustice and intensifies dehumanizing trends.⁷²

In light of this multilayered understanding of social sin, we can begin to perceive the complex dynamics at play in resistance to a Catholic immigration ethic. Given the relationship between the United States and "sending countries" in geographic, economic, and political terms, U.S. citizens may be willfully negligent of or indirectly responsible for the conditions that

⁷¹ See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1966), on the external objectification and internalization processes that indicate the objective and historical fact of social institutions and their idea that such structures embody value relationships, operating not only outside of persons, but also within them. See also Piet Schoonenberg's description of being "situated" in sin: "Modern individual and social psychology makes us realize to what extent the decision of our will is influenced by our way of seeing concrete reality . . . [and] by our whole former education and present environment. All of this constitutes the ground on which, and the raw materials with which, our free decision takes shape" (Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, trans. Joseph Donceel [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1965] 111). Finally, Häring too emphasizes the impact of one's environment, which includes more than people with whom we directly or indirectly come into contact: "our cultural heritage, the world in which we live, civilized nature, the conditions of economic and professional life with its organizations and groupings, the complex reality of political life and legislation, of off-time entertainment, particularly, however, of public opinion which approaches us through thousands of channels" (Bernard Häring, *What Does Christ Want?* [Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House 1968] 206).

⁷² Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist, 1975) 200–203. In a similar manner Stephen Duffy's fourfold typology incorporates the embodiment of social sin in (1) dehumanizing behavior, (2) cultural and religious symbols that ignite the heart and imagination to reinforce unjust institutional arrangements, (3) false consciousness "created by institutions and ideologies that allow people to participate in a network of oppression with self-righteousness," and (4) resulting collective decisions and consent. Stephen J. Duffy, "Sin," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical, 1993) 901.

give rise to undocumented migration across their borders. Following Baum's four levels, the factors propelling undocumented migration include, for example, the impact of an immigration system whose discrepancy between labor needs and legal avenues for work in certain sectors, outmoded family visa caps, and focus on symptoms rather than causes have increased the volume and danger of extralegal flows over the last decade. The primacy of deterrence has institutionalized (ill-founded) concerns for security rather than for human rights or family unity in U.S. immigration laws, and the nation's economic interests have been institutionalized in uneven free trade agreements.⁷³ Commodification trends are apparent in the asymmetry of Southwestern border fortification, on the one hand, and negligible surveillance of containers entering U.S. ports and the free flow of capital, on the other;⁷⁴ in the workplace raid practices that reduce family members to economic units; and in proposed "point systems." Such trends are also evident in the development of highly organized and profitable human trafficking networks. As O'Keefe notes regarding Baum's "Level 1," "The injustices and dehumanizing trends within these structural relationships indicate that the inherent value of certain persons and some of the values that are essential to authentic human development have been hidden, masked, or skewed in society."⁷⁵

A consideration of operative ideologies that shape social trends and legitimate institutions suggests that media portrayals of immigrants as free-loaders or purveyors of disease⁷⁶ are at least as influential as religious

⁷³ Whereas the aggregate impact of NAFTA or CAFTA is complex and debatable, most agree they have taken a negative toll on the most vulnerable populations in Latin America, who rely more than ever on remittances sent home by family members who migrate to the United States. In 2008 the bishops of Mexico directly linked the recent surge in immigration to the United States to the effects of NAFTA on small rural communities whose farmers are unable to compete with heavily subsidized producers north of their border. Vatican Representative to the United Nations Archbishop Celestino Migliore has decried free trade agendas that focus only on market forces and aggravate global inequalities with practices like harmful agricultural subsidies for rich countries' own farmers; he has asserted instead that trade should prioritize the sustainable growth of the economies of developing countries. See Archbishop Celestino Migliore's October 17, 2006, statement to the meeting of the U.N. General Assembly on international trade and development, <http://www.holyseemission.org/17Oct2006.html>.

⁷⁴ In contrast to increased border fortification, only 2% of containers entering U.S. ports are checked, highlighting this priority of capital to persons in related policy considerations.

⁷⁵ O'Keefe, "Social Sin and Fundamental Option" 137.

⁷⁶ As Carmen Nanko-Fernández points out, the association of im/migrants with disease-bearers in an age of pandemics "harkens back to Nazi rhetoric about Jews and others deemed detrimental to the state, and recalls images of braceros in a cloud of DDT being fumigated prior to entering the United States to work"

rhetoric championing human rights of undocumented immigrants. At a general level, the scale of undocumented immigration to the United States has fostered a widespread conception of immigrants as threatening the rule of law, social cohesion, and the nation's economic health. As these concerns get amplified or distorted by xenophobia, ethnocultural nationalism, or fear, anti-immigrant sentiment has led, in extreme cases, to the demonization of populations of color through increasingly mainstream outlets, as evidenced by the 40% increase in anti-Hispanic hate crimes between 2003 and 2007.⁷⁷ Amid a climate of anti-immigrant sentiment, buzzwords such as "national security" and "illegal alien" can serve as idols to conceal a sinful reality and provoke demonization. As the events of September 11, 2001, placed unlawful entry into the United States in a national security context, politicians and others have all but conflated Southwestern border crossings with security breaches of large-scale, violent consequence. Whereas no terrorists have been caught along the Southwestern border, fear mongering and scapegoating of undocumented immigrants is on the rise. Sinful actions sustain such potent myths when news commentators exaggerate with impunity claims from immigrant tax evasion to violent crime and foster myths regarding the "North American Union" or a *reconquista*,⁷⁸ or when Minutemen consider it their "patriotic duty" to intimidate and harass "illegals." At a more subtle level, a consumerist ideology shapes citizens' willingness to underpay or mistreat undocumented persons either directly or through indirect demand for inexpensive goods and services. Describing "Level 2" O'Keefe remarks, "Symbols are the vessels in which values are enshrined and the avenue by which values enter the human imagination, self-understanding and worldview. When cultural or religious symbols mask or hide values, they support the structural relationships that perpetuate injustice and that hinder authentic human development."⁷⁹ Cultural ideologies have been highlighted here, but we also must assess the power of religious symbols, given Christian resistance to hospitality alluded to at the outset: how, for example, individualistic penitential rituals reinforce limited

(Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, "Beyond Hospitality: Implications of Im/migration for Teología y Pastoral de Conjunto," *Perspectivas: Hispanic Theological Initiative Occasional Paper Series* 10 [Fall 2006] 51–62, at 57).

⁷⁷ Spencer S. Hsu, "Hate Crimes Rise as Immigration Debate Heats Up," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2009. Hsu relies on the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights' report, "Confronting the New Faces of Hate," <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/hatecrimes/>.

⁷⁸ See Media Matters Action Network's "Fear and Loathing in Prime Time: Immigration Myths and Cable News" (May 21, 2008) for a study documenting the rhetoric surrounding immigration on cable news with particular attention to common myths and "urban legends" regarding undocumented immigrants, <http://mediamattersaction.org/static/pdfs/fear-and-loathing.pdf>.

⁷⁹ O'Keefe, "Social Sin and Fundamental Option" 137.

conceptions of sin, or the perception of a single- or narrow-issue political agenda obscures the imperative of “defend[ing] life after birth and before death.”⁸⁰

These ideologically anchored structures of injustice then produce the scotosis or blindness that lulls U.S. Catholics, among others, into equating “law-abiding” with “just” or into apathetic acquiescence. Social manifestations of these ideologies (such as a priority given to possessions or capital over persons) may aggregate to “large-scale hardness of heart.”⁸¹ Hence to allow ourselves to remain ignorant of the plight of small farmers in Mexico, the fatal realities of the yet-unfortified stretches of border, or the treatment of undocumented immigrants in detention centers is arguably, in this age of globalized technology and media, entering the realm of culpable ignorance. When the comfortable allow themselves thus to remain unaware of the plight of the poor, we are able to “cherish the illusions” that keep us in a privileged position.⁸² Hence internalized fears, tribalism, or callous greed can directly lead to silent acquiescence or indolence (“Level 3”). Internalized ideologies and distorted consciousness can also then lead to collective unjust decisions and actions. Recent years have witnessed the passage of punitive local ordinances, a sharp increase in workplace raids without proportionate employer accountability, the failure of comprehensive legislative reform, and the escalated abuse of undocumented persons (“Level 4”).

These various levels also intersect and interrelate in complex manners. Pervasive, internalized ideologies make us susceptible to myths; operative understandings influence our actions or inaction. When bias hides or skews values, it becomes more difficult to choose authentic values over those that prevail in society, a tendency already present because of original sin. As O’Keefe puts it, with social sin “the disordered sense of value from outside meets the internal tendency to choose the lesser value in situations of choice or to act for mere satisfaction rather than value.”⁸³ Whether in the form of nationalism, expediency, or profit, social inducements to personal sin in the immigration context abound.

Hence the many “fences,” both physical and ideological, which North Americans construct to exclude and protect, harm vulnerable immigrant

⁸⁰ As Dean Brackley recently put it, this imperative “is the condition of credibility today for anyone who speaks about eternal life” (Dean Brackley, S.J., “The Church and the Crucified Peoples,” May 20, 2007, St. Ignatius Church, San Francisco Calif., <http://www.usfca.edu/lanecenter/pdf/Brackley5.20.07.pdf>).

⁸¹ As Henriot suggests, “the act orientation of traditional moral theology does not provide much assistance in guiding individual Christian consciences [in the case of large-scale hardness of heart]” (Henriot, “Social Sin” 134).

⁸² See Patrick Kerans, *Sinful Social Structures* (New York: Paulist, 1974) 83–104, for his Lonerganian understanding of “knowing ignorance.”

⁸³ O’Keefe, “Social Sin and Fundamental Option” 138.

populations and hinder hospitality. These entrenched, intertwined patterns of social sin require repentance from sustaining harmful myths out of fear or bias, from the greed of consumerism, and from indifference to the plight of the marginalized south of the U.S. border and on its street corners. From repentance and conscientization⁸⁴ U.S. Catholics are called to conversion toward interdependence in solidarity.⁸⁵ As the U.S. and Mexican bishops note, “part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism; accepting migrants not as foreboding aliens, terrorists or economic threats, but as persons with dignity and rights, revealing the presence of Christ; and recognizing migrants as bearers of deep cultural values and rich faith traditions.”⁸⁶ Such nonvoluntary dimensions are directly related to structural reform. John Glaser argues that “policy change grows out of moral, public transformation,” such that a foundational vision and the structures needed to realize and sustain it must precede concrete policy programs.⁸⁷ At the broader systemic level, nations must understand themselves as collectively responsible for the international order and consequently the challenges posed by migration patterns. Such international conversion requires “a transformation of the present, often opportunistic interdependency among nations into something that grows out of a moral commitment to the global common good.”⁸⁸

Many U.S. Catholics remain too far removed from such realities to be attuned to such an invitation and its demands. Yet against these challenges stands the hope for personal conversion and social change that liberation theology and magisterial teaching alike hold out, acknowledging that a

⁸⁴ In this article I use the term “conscientization” to refer more broadly to the process by which all sectors of society, particularly privileged ones, become newly aware of the presence of injustice and the demands of justice, rather than a Freirian notion of liberative education for oppressed populations. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

⁸⁵ In John Paul II’s words, “These attitudes and ‘structures of sin’ are only conquered—presupposing the help of divine grace—by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 38 [see Mt 10:40–42; 20:25; Mk 10:42–45; Lk 22:25–27]).

⁸⁶ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and *Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano*, “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope” no. 40, <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml>.

⁸⁷ John W. Glaser, “Health Care Reform as Public Conscience Work: U.S. Health Care as Chronic Social Sin,” *A Matter of Spirit (AMOS)* 79 (Summer 2008) 1–2 (a publication of the Seattle-based Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center).

⁸⁸ Christopher Steck, S.J., “Solidarity, Citizenship, and Globalization: Developing a New Framework for Theological Reflection on U.S.-Mexico Immigration,” *Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 14.2 (2004) 153–78, at 164.

change of mind must be precipitated by a change of heart. A change of heart can occur through personal encounters and relationships that provoke new perspectives and receptivity. I turn finally to some pastoral responses that might engender metanoia.

FROM SOCIAL SIN TO SOLIDARITY: A PARADIGM FOR PASTORAL ACTION

While my emphasis on the influence of social contexts should not be misunderstood as deterministic, and persons are called to critique and transcend prevailing cultural trends and ideologies, “the ultimate durability of any personal conversion and the ability of others to convert will require that authentic values be recognized and chosen within their social context.”⁸⁹ How then can the Church better institutionally embody such values and facilitate personal and social conversion? In his work on social sin, Himes identifies a community’s ability to shape its members’ imagination through word and symbol as “an unparalleled resource for providing a vision to those who are blind.”⁹⁰ The U.S. Church has undertaken pastoral outreach and political advocacy on behalf of just and humane immigration reform, yet the laity remains divided on the issue. As Carmen Nanko-Fernández notes of its immigration efforts, “The inability of ecclesial leadership to communicate this profound tradition of social justice in a concrete manner that makes sense to the grassroots remains an obstacle to the task of justice.”⁹¹ It bears consideration, then, how the Church might build on its existing commitment to invite conversion in word and witness.

Certainly the Church has appropriated prophetic and New Testament texts demanding justice and hospitality for the sojourner, but explicitly naming the sinful realities surrounding migration will continue to sharpen the Church’s prophetic potential. This entails identifying subjective participation in the exploitative structures and ideologies traced above as “sinful” as well as publicly underscoring their dehumanizing impact. As merely one example, Catholic Relief Services–Mexico now estimates that more than 70% of women attempting to cross the border are sexually exploited en route.⁹² Such conscientization can begin to heal a collective imagination that absolutizes “limited goods, such as nationalism and sovereignty, over against truly absolute goods, such as the interdependence and solidarity of the human family.”⁹³

⁸⁹ O’Keefe, “Social Sin and Fundamental Option” 143.

⁹⁰ Himes, “Social Sin and the Role of the Individual” 214.

⁹¹ Nanko-Fernández, “Beyond Hospitality” 55.

⁹² Erica Dahl-Bredine, Country Manager, Catholic Relief Services-Mexico Program, personal report to visiting delegation, Tucson. May 22, 2009.

⁹³ J. Bryan Hehir, “With No Vision, People Perish,” in *All Come Bearing Gifts*, Proceedings of the National Migration Conference (Washington: U.S. Conference

Given the complexity of responsibility in situations of social sin and of immigration matters, conscientization should also entail experiential strategies to uncover persons' passive support for attitudes and institutions that help maintain structural injustice. Dean Brackley helpfully posits that the cognitive liberation that broadens our limited horizons (which both interpret and distort reality) demands experiential engagement; he rejects the idea that reason alone can accomplish such transformation, since affectivity and commitment are central to the problem of distortion and thus remain crucial to its "hygiene."⁹⁴ As a community that ministers to protectionist and undocumented alike, the Church is well poised to help move its members beyond episodic encounters in which they remain confirmed in their viewpoints or unwilling to generalize beyond one "trustworthy worker" or "goodhearted parent." This first step of "overcoming blindness through conscientization" is essential, notes Himes, for "until a person moves beyond the stage of uncritical naïveté to the threshold of critical consciousness, it is not possible to enter into the world of mature moral reflection."⁹⁵

Given that social sin entails the multiple dimensions discussed here and requires both personal conversion and social transformation, I now conclude with a case study of an ecclesial model that attempts a holistic approach to its immigration outreach and witness: The work of Dolores Mission Parish in East Los Angeles embodies a hybrid response that integrates the conversion of hearts and institutions in ways particularly relevant to the multileveled barriers to receptivity explored above.⁹⁶

This Jesuit parish engages in a range of dynamic outreach efforts, including provision of services to recent immigrants through its Guadalupe Homeless project. Every evening for nearly 20 years, the church has opened its doors to the homeless and the day laborers of Los Angeles. Many of these are undocumented immigrants seeking a safe place to eat, shower and sleep; cots are set up between the pews and alongside the altar, and "sanctuary" takes on all of its many meanings. When the church first opened its doors and extended the notion of political sanctuary in the 1980s to include providing haven for economic migrants—a not uncontroversial decision at the time—then-pastor Gregory Boyle, S.J., reflected that the community dissolved the notion of "us vs. them" that frequently characterizes

of Catholic Bishops, 2003) as cited in Campese, "Beyond Ethnic and National Imagination" 187.

⁹⁴ Dean Brackley, S.J., "Higher Standards for Higher Education: The Christian University and Solidarity," *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 37 (2002) 6–24, <http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/brackley.html>.

⁹⁵ Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual" 193.

⁹⁶ As a disclaimer, I was a parishioner of Dolores Mission parish from 2005 to 2009. Sean Carroll, S.J., Michael Kennedy, S.J., and Arturo Lopez were interviewed for this section by Charles Bergman and me.

debates about “illegal aliens.” This move was central to cultivating what Boyle described as kinship, a virtue fundamental to the Catholic ethic regarding migration and reception.⁹⁷

Jon Sobrino’s reflections on the original sanctuary movement remain relevant for the contemporary context: “Sanctuary does not have to become a political movement but it cannot ignore its political connotations and consequences if it is going to defend the life of the poor. . . . It has to confront the contradictions and unmask the politics that support death rather than life for Central Americans,” and, by extension, contemporary Latin American migrants.⁹⁸ Beyond meeting the immediate needs of a vulnerable population, the Dolores Mission community’s mobilization in response to proposed immigration legislation in recent years has embodied nuanced Christian social witness that confounds typical categories that remain primarily spiritual or political. For example, just prior to Lent 2006, as a shared spiritual exercise, the parish undertook a month-long communal fast for justice for immigrants engaging personal and social dimensions not unlike the sin dialectic outlined above. Participants conceived of the fast as both prayer (in terms of the desire to empty ourselves of what distracts us from knowledge of God’s love) and as an act of solidarity, a bond of sympathy with those who, like so many immigrants, suffer physical, spiritual, and emotional hunger. The prayer and fasting were coupled with prophetic preaching and consistent legislative advocacy and voter education on behalf of comprehensive and humane immigration reform.⁹⁹ At the end of the Lenten season, the practice of undocumented men having their feet washed on Holy Thursday by Bishop Gabino Zavala powerfully conveyed the parish’s embracing posture.

On Good Friday 2008, the community undertook a Way of the Cross procession through the city culminating at the Federal Building downtown. The parishioners united their own sufferings with Christ’s passion; public devotionals at each station focused on issues such as poverty, families torn apart by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, and exploitative labor practices. The extensive media coverage of participants’ witness to Jesus crucified in the undocumented person and efforts to illuminate

⁹⁷ For a helpful discussion of how the overlapping virtues of solidarity, compassion, and hospitality link matters of social justice (including undocumented immigration) to moral formation, see Christopher Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic Commitment to the Common Good: An Approach Rooted in Virtue Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 394–417.

⁹⁸ Sobrino, “Sanctuary: A Theological Analysis” 168.

⁹⁹ The community’s efforts included letter-writing campaigns and visits to state senators, several marches and protests outside City Hall and the offices of the Democratic and Republican National Committees, sustained collaboration with immigration reform coalitions across the city, and peaceful civil disobedience.

hearts and minds in favor of just and humane reform presents a countersign to vitriolic anti-immigrant messaging in news and opinion media. The parish's multidimensional approach well represents the elements Henriot identifies as constitutive of the Church's social mission: prophetic word, symbolic witness, and political action.¹⁰⁰

Hence Dolores Mission's sustained immigration response embodies a hybrid pastoral model appropriate to countering the interrelated levels of social sin and resistance outlined above. It incorporates methods that surface Christian duties to resist unjust social structures; respond to the needy in their midst who have fallen victim to institutional violence; and negotiate tensions between discipleship and citizenship.¹⁰¹ Such a paradigm can offer guidance for U.S. Christians wrestling with faithful discipleship regarding issues beyond immigration alone. Siding with the "strangers in their midst" who, in fact, comprise an integral part of this community, parishioners bear countercultural witness to dominant ideologies like cultural superiority. By integrating Christian practices of prayer, charity, solidarity, and collaborative advocacy, this parish-based response begins to counter the matrix of social sins that conceal and oppress.

In terms of replicating its general approach, it is useful to note Dolores Mission's engagement of a "see, judge, act" methodology as it proceeds from encounter, to reflection, to multipronged action. The continual presence of undocumented immigrants through the Guadalupe Homeless Project keeps alive the memory of community members' roots and does not allow the human experience of suffering to become abstract. Hence initiatives that bring parishioners face-to-face with immigrant communities (in the United States or in countries of origin) can help foster hospitality and correct personal and collective outlooks that remain obscured at the level of ideology.

Next, within its base communities, members take seriously biblical exhortations and continually critique social issues like immigration through the lens of Catholic social teaching in order to reveal the sinfulness of political structures and other obstacles. Thus parishes could link education, outreach, and liturgical efforts, integrating structural and historical realities with the illumination of scriptural and magisterial teaching, and naming the sinfulness of realities rather than avoiding any perception of politicized faith.

Finally, as noted, Dolores Mission moves from encounter and analysis into opportunities for compassionate political action seamlessly integrated into the spiritual life of the parish, combining communal fasts with legislative advocacy, reflective prayer with direct service, and routinely incorporating

¹⁰⁰ See Henriot, "Social Sin and Conversion" 122–30.

¹⁰¹ In "Bridging the Divide in Contemporary U.S. Catholic Social Ethics," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 401–40, I analyze such hybridity in terms of the mutual clarification of "radicalist" and "public" approaches to Christian social responsibility.

undocumented persons' *testimonios* into liturgical and advocacy settings alike. Parish leaders participate in citywide interfaith immigration reform networks and advocate on Capitol Hill. Empowerment and relationship-building also constitute key elements: the parish has formed a group of *promotores*—including some Guadalupe Homeless Project residents—whom they train to inform immigrant residents about their rights. Families of mixed status or vulnerable workers are educated on concrete steps to follow if caught in a raid, and parish-based community organizers are setting up structures to help undocumented residents designate custody of their children so they do not end up in the care of the state. Ecclesial models like Dolores Mission's can assist U.S. Catholics' formation for conversion amid a complex web of social sins on matters of undocumented immigration as well as other symptoms of social injustice.¹⁰²

More broadly, such processes of communal conversion coupled with public repentance hold the potential to reframe public debate about immigration. Given the nonvoluntary dimensions of social sin, "love and good will alone" are insufficient to expose sinful structures. Rather, as Baum observes, "It is through moments of interruption, disturbing events that shatter our perceptions, that we discover the human damage done by our taken-for-granted world."¹⁰³ Any public witness to an ethic of hospitality and justice in the U.S. Catholic context must entail repentance from complicity in patterns of imperialism and neocolonialism as well as from the sin of exceptionalism engrained in the nation's social psyche.¹⁰⁴ Each of these "Christian" and "American" social sins directly bears on immigration, and credible witness cannot ensue without such repentance.

Whereas determining the precise implications of such atonement in terms of culpability or reparations entails complex considerations, Baum helpfully identifies "readiness to mourn" and a "keener sense of personal responsibility" as proper spiritual responses to social sin. Shared grieving and assumption of the "burden of collective transgressions by spiritual solidarity" prepare participants for "social renewal and political action."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² The interfaith "new sanctuary movement" as well as the haven that St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Church in Postville, Iowa, offered following that town's large-scale raid (similarly combining sanctuary, outreach, and spirituality) represent additional models. For information on the New Sanctuary Movement, see <http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org/>. For information on St. Bridget's efforts (the parish opened its doors to 400, offering sanctuary from *la migra*, food distribution, commemorative liturgical services and symbols), see Samuel G. Freedman, "Immigrants Find Solace After Storm of Arrests," *New York Times*, July 12, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/12/us/12religion.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

¹⁰³ Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* 203.

¹⁰⁴ I am grateful to Jonathan Y. Tan for drawing my attention to these significant elements, including counterexamples of repentance in Asian and Canadian contexts.

¹⁰⁵ Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* 200–201.

In terms of sacramental practice, the Church can facilitate and embody *conscientización* through communal examinations of conscience and penitential liturgies.¹⁰⁶ As James Cross has argued, “in the very gathering at a communal penitential liturgy, the Church is more obviously and more meaningfully symbolizing its conversion as well as the conversion from unjust habits and practices that human persons generally desire and pursue.”¹⁰⁷ Religious and civic bodies’ public repentance for past cooperation with the forms of social sin articulated herein could begin to convert communities away from amnesic entitlement and toward solidarity with those on the underside of such histories. Identification with the dispossessed and movements toward their emancipation, flowing from a spirit of repentance, can help end our subjective participation in social injustices.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ James T. Cross, “Communal Penance and Public Life: On the Church’s Becoming a Sign of Conversion from Social Sin,” in *Faith in Public Life*, ed. William J. Collinge (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 2008) 284–97, at 289–90.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 290–91.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory Baum, “Critical Theology,” in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978) 281–95, at 294.