



*Immigration and the “Next America”:  
Perspectives from Our History*

*The Most Rev. José H. Gomez  
Archbishop of Los Angeles*

*Napa Institute  
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My brothers and sisters, I want to thank you for your kind invitation to be here today. I am honored to talk to such a distinguished group.

Since I moved to California about a year ago, I’ve discovered that people here have very definite opinions about immigration. It was the same way when I was in Texas and in Colorado. Everywhere I go, it seems like most people I meet have made up their minds already on this issue.

So today, if you don’t mind, I am not going to talk about the politics of immigration.

Our political debate about immigration in America frustrates me. Often I think we are we are just talking around the edges of the real issues.

Both sides of this argument are inspired by a beautiful, patriotic idea of America’s history and values. But lately I’ve been starting to wonder. What America are we really talking about?

America is changing and it has been changing for a long time. The forces of globalization are changing our economy and forcing us to rethink the scope and purpose of our government. Threats from outside enemies are changing our sense of national sovereignty.

America is changing on the inside, too.

Our culture is changing. We have a legal structure that allows, and even pays for, the killing of babies in the womb. Our courts and legislatures are redefining the natural institutions of marriage and the family. We have an elite culture — in government, the media and academia — that is openly hostile to religious faith.

America is becoming a fundamentally different country. It is time for all of us to recognize this — no matter what our position is on the political issue of immigration.

We need to recognize that immigration is part of a larger set of questions about our national identity and destiny. What is America? What does it mean to be an American?

Who are we as a people — and where are heading as a country? What will the “next America” look like?

As Catholics who are faithful citizens in America, we have to answer these questions within a larger frame of reference. We have to always remember that there is more to the life of any nation than the demands of the moment in politics, economics and culture. We have to consider all of those demands and the debates about them in light of God’s plan for the nations.

This is a big challenge for us in this culture. Our culture pushes us to “privatize” our faith, to separate our faith from our life in society. We always have to resist that temptation. We are called to live our faith in our businesses, homes and communities, and in our participation in public life.

That means we have to bring a Catholic faith perspective to this debate about immigration. We cannot just think about this issue as Democrats or Republicans or as liberals or conservatives.

That means we have to listen to the teachings of our Church on this issue. But that’s not what I want to talk about today. I think we all know the teachings of our Church on this issue.

What we need to understand better is how to see immigration in light of America’s history and purposes, as seen through the perspective of our Catholic faith. When we understand immigration from this perspective we can see that immigration is not a problem for America. It’s an opportunity. It is a key to our American renewal.

So I want to start by talking about our American history.

One of the problems we have today is that we have lost the sense of America’s national “story.” If our people know our history at all, what they know is incomplete. And when we don’t know the whole story, we end up with the wrong assumptions about American identity and culture.

The American story that most of us know is set in New England. It’s the story of the pilgrims and the Mayflower, the first Thanksgiving, and John Winthrop’s sermon about a “city upon a hill.”

It’s the story of great men like Washington, Jefferson and Madison. It’s the story of great documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

It’s a beautiful story. It’s also true. Every American should know these characters and the ideals and principles they fought for. From this story we learn that our American

identity and culture are rooted in essentially Christian beliefs about the dignity of the human person.

But the story of the founding fathers and the truths they held to be self-evident is not the whole story about America.

The rest of the story starts more than a century before the pilgrims. It starts in the 1520s in Florida and in the 1540s here in California.

It is the story not of colonial settlement and political and economic opportunity. It's the story of exploration and evangelization. This story is not Anglo-Protestant but Hispanic-Catholic. It is centered, not in New England but in Nueva España — New Spain — at opposite corners of the continent.

From this story we learn that before this land had a name its inhabitants were being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The people of this land were called Christians before they were called Americans. And they were called this name in the Spanish, French and English tongues.

From this history, we learn that long before the Boston Tea Party, Catholic missionaries were celebrating the holy Mass on the soil of this continent. Catholics founded America's oldest settlement, in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565.

Immigrant missionaries were naming this continent's rivers and mountains and territories for saints, sacraments and articles of the faith.

We take these names for granted now. But our American geography testifies that our nation was born from the encounter with Jesus Christ. Sacramento ("Holy Sacrament"). Las Cruces ("the Cross"). Corpus Christi ("Body of Christ"). Even the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, named for the precious blood of Christ.

The 19th-century historian John Gilmary Shea said it beautifully. Before there were houses in this land, there were altars: "Mass was said to hallow the land and draw down the blessing of heaven before the first step was taken to rear a human habitation. The altar was older than the hearth."<sup>i</sup>

This is the missing piece of American history. And today more than ever, we need to know this heritage of holiness and service — especially as American Catholics.

Along with Washington and Jefferson, we need to know the stories of these great apostles of America.

We need to know the French missionaries like Mother Joseph and the Jesuits St. Isaac Jogues and Father Jacques Marquette who came down from Canada to bring the faith to

the northern half of our country. We need to know the Hispanic missionaries like the Franciscan Magin Catalá and the Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino who came up from Mexico to evangelize the Southwest and the Northwest territories.

We should know the stories of people like Ven. Antonio Margil. He was a Franciscan priest and is one of my favorite figures from the first evangelization of America.

Ven. Antonio left his homeland in Spain to come to the New World in 1683. He told his mother he was coming here — because “millions of souls [were] lost for want of priests to dispel the darkness of unbelief.”

People used to call him “the Flying Padre.” He traveled 40 or 50 miles every day, walking barefoot. Fray Antonio had a truly continental sense of mission. He established churches in Texas and Louisiana, and also in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico.

He was a priest of great courage and love. He escaped death many times at the hands of the native peoples he came to evangelize. Once he faced a firing squad of a dozen Indians armed with bows and arrows. Another time he was almost burned alive at the stake.

I came to know about Fray Antonio when I was in San Antonio because he preached there in 1719 and 1720 and founded the San José Mission there.

He used to talk about San Antonio as the center of the evangelization of America. He said: “San Antonio . . . will be the headquarters of all the missions which God our Lord will establish . . . that in his good time all of this New World may be converted to his holy Catholic faith.”<sup>ii</sup>

This is the real reason for America, when we consider our history in light of God’s plan for the nations. America is intended to be a place of encounter with the living Jesus Christ.

This was the motivation of the missionaries who came here first. America’s national character and spirit are deeply marked by the Gospel values they brought to this land. These values are what make the founding documents of our government so special.

Although founded by Christians, America has become home to an amazing diversity of cultures, religions and ways of life. This diversity flourishes precisely because our nation’s founders had a Christian vision of the human person, freedom, and truth.

G. K. Chesterton said famously that “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.”<sup>iii</sup> And that “creed,” as he recognized, is fundamentally Christian. It

is the basic American belief that all men and women are created equal — with God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Every other nation in history has been established on the basis of common territory and ethnicity — the ties of land and kinship. America instead is based on this Christian idea, on this creed that reflects the amazing universalism of the Gospel. As a result, we have always been a nation of nationalities. *E pluribus unum*. One people made from peoples of many nations, races, and creeds.

Throughout our history, problems have always arisen when we have taken this American creed for granted. Or when we have tried to limit it in some way. That's why it is essential that today we remember the missionary history of America — and rededicate ourselves to the vision of America's founding "creed."

When we forget our country's roots in the Hispanic-Catholic mission to the new world, we end up with distorted ideas about our national identity. We end up with the idea that Americans are descended from only white Europeans and that our culture is based only on the individualism, work ethic and rule of law that we inherited from our Anglo-Protestant forebears.

When that has happened in the past it has led to those episodes in our history that we are least proud of — the mistreatment of Native Americans; slavery; the recurring outbreaks of nativism and anti-Catholicism; the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II; the misadventures of "manifest destiny."

There are, of course, far more complicated causes behind these moments in our history. But at the root, I think we can see a common factor — a wrongheaded notion that "real Americans" are of some particular race, class, religion or ethnic background.

I worry that in the political debates over immigration we are entering into a new period of nativism.

The intellectual justification for this new nativism was set out a few years ago in an influential book by the late Samuel Huntington of Harvard, called *Who Are We?* He made a lot of sophisticated-sounding arguments, but his basic argument was that American identity and culture are threatened by Mexican immigration.

Authentic American identity "was the product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of America in the 17th and 18th centuries," according to Huntington.

By contrast, Mexicans' values are rooted in a fundamentally incompatible "culture of Catholicism" which, Huntington argued, does not value self-initiative or the work ethic, and instead encourages passivity and an acceptance of poverty.

These are old and familiar nativist claims, and they are easy to discredit. One could point to the glorious legacy of Hispanic literature and art, or to Mexican-Americans' and Hispanic-Americans' accomplishments in business, government, medicine and other areas.

Unfortunately, today we hear ideas like Huntington's being repeated on cable TV and talk radio — and sometimes even by some of our political leaders.

There is no denying significant differences between Hispanic-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant cultural assumptions.

But my point is that this kind of bigoted thinking stems from an incomplete understanding of American history. Historically, both cultures have a rightful claim to a place in our national “story” — and in the formation of an authentic American identity and national character.

This leads me to the words I want to say finally about our responsibilities as Catholics.

I believe American Catholics have a special duty today to be the guardians of the truth about the American spirit and our national identity. I believe it falls to us to be witnesses to a new kind of American patriotism.

We are called to bring out all that is noble in the American spirit. We are also called to challenge those who would diminish or “downsize” America's true identity.

Since I came to California, I have been thinking a lot about Blessed Junípero Serra, the Franciscan immigrant who came from Spain via Mexico to evangelize this great state.

Blessed Junípero loved the native peoples of this continent. He learned their local languages, customs and beliefs. He translated the Gospel and the prayers and teachings of the faith so that everyone could hear the mighty works of God in their own native tongue!<sup>iv</sup>

He used to trace the sign of the cross on people's foreheads and say to them, Amar a Dios! Love God!

I think this is a good way to understand our duty as Catholics in our culture today. We need to find a way to “translate” the Gospel of love for the people of our times.

We need to remind our brothers and sisters of the truths taught by Blessed Junípero and his brother missionaries. That we are all children of the same Father in heaven. That our Father in heaven does not make some nationalities or racial groups to be “inferior” or less worthy of his blessings.

Catholics need to lead our country to a new spirit of empathy. We need to help our brothers and sisters to start seeing the strangers among us for who they truly are — and not according to political or ideological categories or definitions rooted in our own fears.

This is difficult, I know. I know it is a particular challenge to see the humanity of those immigrants who are here illegally.

Now, I promised that I wouldn't talk about politics, and so far I haven't. And I won't. I only want to offer one suggestion.

The truth is that very few people “choose” to leave their homelands. Emigration is almost always forced upon people by the dire conditions they face in their lives.

Most of the men and women who are living in America without proper documentation have traveled hundreds even thousands of miles. They have left everything behind, risked their safety and their lives. They have done this, not for their own comfort or selfish needs. They have done this to feed their loved ones. To be good mothers and fathers. To be loving sons and daughters.

These immigrants — no matter how they came here — are people of energy and aspiration. They are people who are not afraid of hard work or sacrifice. They are not anything like the people Professor Huntington and others are describing!

These men and women have courage and the other virtues. The vast majority of them believe in Jesus Christ and love our Catholic Church, They share traditional American values of faith, family and community.

That is why I believe our immigrant brothers and sisters are the key to American renewal.

And we all know that America is in need of renewal — economic and political, but also spiritual, moral and cultural renewal.

I believe these men and women who are coming to this country will bring a new, youthful entrepreneurial spirit of hard work to our economy. I also believe they will help renew the soul of America.

In his last book, written the year he died, Blessed John Paul II said: “The history of all nations is called to take its place in the history of salvation.”<sup>v</sup>

We must look at immigration in the context of America's need for renewal. And we need to consider both immigration and American renewal in light of God's plan for salvation and the history of the nations.

The promise of America is that we can be one nation where men and women from every race, creed and national background may live as brothers and sisters.

Each one of us is a child of that promise. If we trace the genealogies of almost everyone in America, the lines of descent will lead us out beyond our borders to some foreign land where each of our ancestors originally came from.

This inheritance comes to American Catholics now as a gift and as a duty. We are called to make our own contributions to this nation — through the way we live our faith in Jesus Christ as citizens.

Our history shows us that America was born from the Church's mission to the nations.

The "next America" will be determined by the choices we make as Christian disciples and as American citizens. By our attitudes and actions, by the decisions we make, we are writing the next chapters of our American story.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Americas, obtain for us the courage we need to do what our good Lord requires.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Catholic Church in Colonial Days* (Edward O. Jenkins' Sons, 1886), 10.

<sup>ii</sup> *Nothingness Itself: Selected Writings of Ven. Fr. Antonio Margil, 1690–1724* (Franciscan Herald, 1976), 268, 270.

<sup>iii</sup> *What I Saw in America* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), 5.

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 2:8, 11.

<sup>v</sup> *Memory and Identity* (Rizzoli, 2005), 72–73.