

## **Catholic Social Teaching and Migration: Perspectives from the US-Mexico Border<sup>1</sup>**

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### RESUMEN

La situación de los migrantes es una preocupación especial de la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia, por todas las implicancias que supone, tanto para las personas involucradas como para las naciones que los acogen. El P. Groody realiza aquí un análisis desde esta perspectiva de la situación de los migrantes mexicanos en los Estados Unidos, y en el papel que la comunidad Cristiana está llamada a cumplir tomando en cuenta los principios de la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia.

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This article is drawn in part from essays previously published entitled, Daniel G. Groody, "[Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees](#)," *Theological Studies* (September 2009): 638-67; Daniel G. Groody, "Homeward Bound: A Theology of Migration," *Journal for Catholic Social Thought* 9, no. 2 (2012): 409-24; and Daniel G. Groody, "A Mission of Reconciliation: Theological Perspectives of a Pilgrim People," in *On Strangers No Longer: Perspectives on the Historic U.S.-Mexican Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Migration*, ed. by Todd Scribner and J. Kevin Appleby, 63-83 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013).

The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC, located next to the current offices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, holds a unique window into the Church's mission to migrants over many generations. This Basilica, in its varied mosaic expressions, honors the manifold contribution of immigrants to the church and society and the various religious communities that have assisted them in difficult times. When visiting the shrine on October 7, 1979, Pope John Paul II remarked,

This Shrine speaks to us with the voice of all America, with the voice of all the sons and daughters of America, who have come here from the various countries of the Old World. When they came, they brought with them in their hearts the same love for the Mother of God that was characteristic of their ancestors and of themselves in their native lands. These people, speaking different languages, coming from different backgrounds of history and traditions in their own countries, came together around the heart of a Mother they all had in common. While their faith in Christ made all of them aware of being one People of God, this awareness became all the more vivid through the presence of the Mother in the work of Christ and the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Among the nationalities represented in the Basilica's chapels are African, Austrian, Byzantine-Ruthenian, Chinese, Cuban, Czech, Filipino, French, German, Guamanian, Indian, Irish, Italian, Korean, Latin American, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian, and Vietnamese. The various religious communities represented in the Basilica are the Augustinians, Carmelites, Claretians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Montfort Missionaries, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Redemptorists, Salesians, Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Providence, the Vincentians and many others. Through its diverse array of culturally expressive chapels and oratories, this Basilica embodies not only the catholicity of the church in both its unity and diversity, but it also highlights its prophetic role in facing the unique social, political, and economic challenges of each generation, particularly those presented by the enduring and perennial issue of migration.

Today is no different. The International Organization of Migration estimates that more than 214 million people are migrating around the world today;<sup>3</sup> this means that one out of every 33 people around the world is living away from their homelands. Approximately 42 million migrants are forcibly uprooted, including 16 million refugees outside their countries and 26 million who are internally displaced.<sup>4</sup> These numbers are the latest figures in successive waves of migration to the United States, and the numbers and needs of these migrants present many pastoral and practical challenges. Continuing a long tradition of solidarity, which has been articulated in various social teaching over the last decades, the Bishops of the United States, together with the Bishops of Mexico, have offered a faith-based vision on the issue of immigration reform which prioritizes people over profits, human costs over financial costs, and development and dignity over destructive and divisive rhetoric that degrades and dehumanizes. On January 24, 2004, these Bishop' conferences published *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*, stating,

Our continent has consistently received immigrants, refugees, exiles, and the persecuted from other lands. Fleeing injustice and oppression and seeking liberty and the opportunity to achieve a full life, many have found work, homes, security, liberty, and growth for themselves and their families. Our countries share this immigrant experience, though with different expressions and to different degrees (SNL, No. 15).

Expanding on some of the core intuitions of the pastoral letter, I want to offer some theological insights on migration that are at the heart of this document. In particular, I want to draw out how this social teaching highlights the church's central mission of reconciliation and its pivot point of justice, which, from a theological perspective, is not simply about courtrooms and scales as much as it is about building right relationships.<sup>5</sup> My focus here is to bring out how the mission of

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See: <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/facts-and-figures/lang/en>, accessed November 29, 2011.

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See: <http://www.unhcr.org/4a3b98706.html>, accessed November 29, 2011.

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For more on this topic, see Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

reconciliation articulated in this teaching is the abiding concern of this search for justice. In the pages that follow I will underline how a theology of migration is present in this teaching because it helps us understand and create right relationships by overcoming the 1) inhuman-human divide; the (2) human-Divine divide; the (3) human-human divide; and the 4) country-kingdom divide. Each offers a way of thinking about theology and migration in light of the church's ministry of reconciliation and the search to become more human before God.

### **Overcoming the Inhuman-Human Divide**

In the book of Genesis we are introduced to *imago Dei* (image of God), a central truth, which emerges throughout the scriptures, that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). This is not just another label for human beings but a way of speaking profoundly about human nature. Defining all human beings in terms of *imago Dei* provides a very different starting point for discourse on migration and creates a very different trajectory for a discussion than commonly uses labels from a socio-political sphere (i.e., alien, migrant, refugee, internally displaced person), or worse, the degrading stereotypes used by nativist groups. *Imago Dei* names the personal and relational nature of human existence and the mystery that human life cannot be understood apart from of the mystery of God.

On the surface it may seem basic to root Catholic social teaching in *imago Dei*, but the term is often ignored in public discourse, which creates many of the problems we have as a global society. Defining the migrant and refugee first and foremost in terms of *imago Dei* roots such persons in the world very differently than if they are principally defined as social and political problems or as illegal aliens. Without adequate consideration of the humanity of the migrant, it is impossible to construct just policies ordered to the common good and which benefit society's weakest members. In *Strangers No Longer* the bishops root their analysis not in models of political pragmatism, economic efficiency, nor cultural imperialism, but most fundamentally in the gospel message and Christ's proclamation of the kingdom of God.

In its efforts to safeguard the dignity of all people, the Bishops of the United States have consistently argued that the moral health of an

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economy is measured not in terms of financial metrics like the gross national product or stock prices but in terms of how the economy affects the quality of life in the community as a whole.<sup>6</sup> They note that an ordered economy must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do *for* people?, What does it do *to* people?, and How do people participate in it?<sup>7</sup> It puts strongest emphasis on what impact the economy has on the poor. It stresses that the economy is made for human beings, not human beings for the economy. In the immigration debate this means that the primary focus has to do first with human and relational costs; Catholic social teaching asks to what extent the economy of a country enhances the dignity of every human being, especially those who are vulnerable and deemed insignificant.

*Imago Dei* also means that people, by implication, ought to have available:

...everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom, even in matters religious.<sup>8</sup>

It is preferable for people to meet such needs in their homeland, but when these conditions cannot be met there, as John XXIII noted, people have a right to emigrate in order to "more fittingly provide a future" for themselves and their family.<sup>9</sup>

For many forced migrants, moving across borders is connected to finding a job. Writing against the backdrop of the exploitation of migrant workers and much global unemployment, John Paul II addressed the connection between human dignity, social justice, and

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USCCB, Economic Justice for All, no. 14, available at: [http://www.osjspm.org/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx) (accessed May 3, 2009).

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*Ibid.*, no. 1.

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*Gaudium et spes*, no. 26.

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John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, no. 106.

work.<sup>10</sup> He notes that “the person working away from his native land, whether as a permanent emigrant or a seasonal worker, should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in that society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search of work should in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploitation.”<sup>11</sup>

Catholic social teaching recognizes the right, and even the responsibility, of a state to control its borders, but it also argues that, when a state cannot provide the conditions necessary for human dignity, people have a right to migrate to foreign lands, even without proper legal documentation.<sup>12</sup> As noted in *Strangers No Longer*,

Catholic teaching has a long and rich tradition in defending the right to migrate. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, the Church’s teaching has provided the basis for the development of basic principles regarding the right to migrate for those attempting to exercise their God-given human rights. Catholic teaching also states that the root causes of migration—poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts—must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families (SNL 28).

In their “Instruction on the Pastoral Care of People Who Migrate,” the bishops of the United States have added that “any limitation on international migration must be undertaken only after careful consideration of the demands of international solidarity. These considerations include development, trade and investment programs, education and training, and even distribution policies designed to narrow the wide gaps between the rich and the poor.”<sup>13</sup> In other words,

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John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, no. 1.

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*Ibid.* no., 23.

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Sacred Congregation for Bishops, *Instruction on the Pastoral Care of People Who Migrate* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, August 22, 1969), 7.

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controlling borders must be addressed only after the issues of distributive justice have been addressed; otherwise we end up looking at immigration as a problem in itself rather than a symptom of deeper social imbalances that precipitate the movement of people.

### Reconciling the Human-Divine Divide

Catholic social teaching connects with God's migration into our sinful, broken existence, and our return migration to our ancestral, spiritual homeland, where at last we find our lives and our relationships made whole again. No aspect of a theology of migration is more fundamental, nor more challenging in its implications, than the incarnation. Through Jesus, God enters into the broken and sinful territory of the human condition in order to help men and women, lost in their earthly sojourn, find their way back home to God (Jn 13:1, 3). From this perspective the incarnation is the great migration of human history: God's movement in love to humanity makes possible humanity's return movement to God.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus enters the world amidst a drama involving documentation (a census of the entire Roman world, Lk 2:1–5). In Matthew's account, Jesus and his family must flee a threat that endangers their lives, making them political refugees (Herod's plot, Mt 2:13–17, a parallel to a foundational migration in biblical history, Exodus 1-14). In John's Gospel, many have trouble believing in Jesus precisely because of the place from which he emigrates (Jn 7:41–43, 52). In a fallen world, human beings find many compelling political, legal, social, and religious reasons to exclude—and reject—the migrant Son of God. Nonetheless, God's word manifests that, even as human beings erect barriers of every sort, God walls off no one from divine fellowship.

The incarnation moves people beyond a narrow, self-serving identity into a greater identification with those considered "other" in society, particularly those like migrants and refugees who are poor and regarded as insignificant. In becoming neighbor to all in the incarnation, that is all who live in the sinful territory of a fallen humanity, God redefines the borders between neighbors and opens up the possibility for new relationships. Migration becomes a descriptive

metaphor for the movement of God toward others in the human response of discipleship.

### **Healing the Human-Human Divide**

The church's ministry of reconciliation also deals with overcoming human constructions that divide the insider from the outsider, particularly those generated by law in its various forms. Equating law with justice creates many problems, especially various forms of structural sins, which protect the powerful and exclude the poor, and can legalize injustice. In the Scriptures we see how Jesus' fellowship with sinners (Mt 9:9–13), his concern for those outside the Law (Mt 8:1–4), and his praise of the righteous Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) raise important questions about law, its purposes, misuses, and abuses. Jesus recognized the value of the Law (Mt 5:17–18), but he also challenged people to see the larger picture of the Law and understand its deeper meaning (Lk 13:10–17). In the Gospels there are three parallel accounts of Jesus' disciples picking heads of grain on the Sabbath to assuage their hunger and of Jesus healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. When challenged by the religious leaders and crowds about breaking Sabbath laws, Jesus responds that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and that the "higher law" is that it is lawful—even required—to do good on the Sabbath and, by extension, on every other day as well (Mt 12:1–14; Mk 2:23–3:6; Lk 6:1–22). By his words and actions, Jesus demonstrates that compassion requires a reading of the Law that gives primary consideration to meeting human needs.

When thousands of immigrants and refugees die each year trying to cross areas like the deserts of the American Southwest or the waters dividing North Africa from Europe, the structures of a society must be carefully examined under the entirety of legal reasoning. Here many different kinds of law are at work: laws of nations that control borders; laws of human nature that lead people to seek opportunities for more dignified lives; natural law that deals with ethical dimensions of responding to those in need; and divine law that expresses the Creator's will for all people. The fact that so many migrants are dying in their efforts to meet basic human needs raises serious questions about current civil laws and policies and their dissonance with other forms of law.

When people cross borders without proper documentation, most are not simply breaking civil laws but obeying the laws of human nature, such as the need to find work in order to feed their families



and attain more dignified lives. Moreover, crossing international borders without papers in most countries is an administrative infraction, not a felony; it is not a violation of divine law or natural law, and in such cases undocumented immigration should in no way be confused with serious criminal activity or threats to national security. Such misunderstanding and injustice occur when immigrants and immigration are perceived primarily as problems in themselves rather than as symptoms of more systemic social ills and inequities, as matters of national security rather than as responses to human insecurity, as social threats rather than as foreign neighbors.

Jesus was particularly concerned with the Law as it took shape in religious form. His practice of table fellowship gives us a very important window into his understanding of the law in light of the kingdom of God. Through table fellowship Jesus fulfills the message of the prophets, invites all people to salvation, and promises his disciples a place "at table" in God's kingdom (Lk 22:30). In sharing a meal with those on the fringes of society in order to create new communities, Jesus frequently crossed borders created by narrow interpretations of the Law. He reached out in particular to those who were marginalized racially (Lk 7:1–10), economically (Lk 7:11–17), religiously (Lk 7:24–35), and morally (Lk 7:36–50). His invitation to the table was good news for the poor and those deemed insignificant or rejected by society; others it confused or even scandalized.

Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and His rejection of social and religious categories of inclusion/exclusion is probably what prompted his critics to want to dispense with him because it affronted their religious vision. As Robert Karris put it, "Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate."<sup>14</sup> In bringing scribe, tax collector, fisherman, and zealot into one community, Jesus challenged his followers to a new kind of relationship beyond humanly constructed borders, one based not on social status, the rules of a nation, or religious self-righteousness, but on a common hope for the coming of God's reign (Mt 8:11; 11:16–19). For Jesus, God's mercy could not be contained within the walls of limited mindsets (Mt 7:1–5; Mt 13:10–17), and he challenged people to realize a higher law based on God's uncalculating mercy rather than on their restricted notions of worthiness and unworthiness (Lk 6:27–38).

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Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 47.

## Crossing Over the Country-Kingdom Divide

Catholic social teaching offers a renewed vision of God and human life as it is lived out between the eschatological horizon of faith and unbelief and a historical horizon of justice and injustice. In its care for all, especially those most in need, the church not only goes beyond borders but unites itself with those on the other side of them, giving expression to its interconnectedness as the body of Christ. In imitation of its founder, the church serves all people regardless of their religious beliefs, their political status, or their national origins.

The central vision of Jesus Christ revolves around the kingdom he proclaimed. This kingdom of truth and life, holiness and grace, justice, love, and peace brings people into a different kind of social and ethical territory.<sup>15</sup> It is based not on geography or politics but on divine initiative and openness of heart, leading to a different kind of vision of the current world order, where many of the first are last and the last first (Mt 19:30; 20:16; Mk 10:31; Lk 13:29–30). Jesus clearly taught that many of the values and metrics people employ to measure others will be inverted and that the excluded will be given priority in the kingdom. The kingdom calls people into movement, making the church exiles on earth, strangers in this world, and sojourners en route to another place.<sup>16</sup>

In Philippians 3:20 Paul describes Christians as living in this world but carrying the passport of another world: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” The author of Hebrews speaks of the journey in hope toward a different place: “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come” (Heb 13:14). In the midst of recounting the stories of the major figures of biblical history, the author writes of their faith and hope:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had

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*Lumen gentium*, no. 36.

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Christine D. Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” *Missiology* 31 (2003): 3–15.

been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13–16).

Because of the human tendency to make God into our own disordered image and likeness, however, we stand before God in constant need of conversion, individually and collectively. Exodus 20:2 states, “I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.” The word Egypt (*mitsrayim*) literally means “double straits,” (a reference to upper and lower straits that form the territory of Egypt through which the Nile flows), “narrow places,” or “narrow confinement.”<sup>17</sup> Beyond the literal reading of the word *mitsrayim*, the subsequent figurative interpretations are striking.

In its story of migration, Israel was delivered not only from a specific national territory but also from a narrow way of thinking. Liberation at Sinai means more than simply taking off the shackles. It involves a cognitive migration, taking on a new mindset, adopting a new way of looking at the world, living out a different vision, and ultimately learning to love as God loves. The migration of Israel after the Exodus was meant to help Israel re-envision how to live in the world, a task that proved more challenging than the geographical migration: it was easier to take Israel out of the *mitsrayim* than to take the *mitsrayim* out of Israel. After coming to power and becoming more prosperous, Israel frequently forgot its history and subsequently those who came to them as strangers and immigrants.

From the perspective of a theology of migration, no text in the New Testament is more central than Matthew 25:31–46.<sup>18</sup> While scholars continue to debate who are the “least” (*elachistōn*) in this passage, what is significant for my discussion here is that this text describes the social location of many migrants and refugees: hungry in their homelands, thirsty in deserts they attempt to cross, naked after

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See Laurel A. Dykstra, *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 58. I am grateful to Lisa Marie Belz for this insight.

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For more on different ways in which Matthew 25:31–46 has been interpreted throughout history, see John R. Donahue, S.J., “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1986): 3–31.

being robbed of their possessions, imprisoned in detention centers, sick in hospitals, and, if they make it to their destination, they are often estranged and marginalized. This text implies that crossing borders makes possible new relationships, and it puts the verdict of judgment, to a great extent, in people's own hands: the extent to which people cross borders in this life determines to what extent they will cross them in the next (Lk 16:19–31). Robert McAfee Brown adds that this text speaks of the judgment of not only individuals but also nations.<sup>19</sup>

Such texts challenge people to move beyond an identity based on a narrow sense of national, racial, or psychological territoriality. They hold out instead the possibility of defining life on much more expansive spiritual terrain consistent with the kingdom of God. This vision takes shape each November when people gather along the Mexican-American border to celebrate a common liturgy. As with other liturgies, a large crowd gathers to pray and worship together. However, at this liturgy a 16-foot iron fence divides the community, one side in Mexico, the other in the United States. Border Patrol agents in helicopters and trucks keep a strict eye on the crowd to ensure that no one passes over from Mexico to the United States, but those gathered praise God for Christ's "Passover" from death to life. In a global reality that often sets up walls and barriers, this Eucharist bears witness to the primacy of God's universal, undivided, and unrestricted love in the context of political constructions that divide people. It also reminds people that the walls dividing us from God and from one another have already begun to crumble and that this new age of reconciliation has already begun, even as Christians wait for its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes again.

### **Conclusion: Passing Over the Death-Life Divide**

If the Exodus story is foundational to the Scriptures, the notion of "passing over" is also central to understanding the church's ministry of reconciliation. A theology of migration is a way of speaking about the mission of the church to build right relationships by passing over from death to life, manifested in part through expressions of solidarity. *Strangers No Longer* has asked people from all walks of life to evaluate how they can work at this mission of reconciliation no matter where they are:

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Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster, 1984), 127–41.

We ask our presidents to continue negotiations on migration issues to achieve a system of migration between the two countries that is more generous, just, and humane. We call for legislatures of our two countries to effect a conscientious revision of the immigration laws and to establish a binational system that accepts migration flows, guaranteeing the dignity and human rights of the migrant. We ask public officials who are in charge of formulating, implementing, and executing immigration laws to reexamine national and local policies toward the migrant and to use their leadership positions to erase misconceptions about migration. We ask adjudicators who process immigrants' legal claims to create a welcoming atmosphere that does not threaten their confidence or security. We encourage the media to support and promote a genuine attitude of welcoming toward migrants and immigrants (SNL No. 104)

We are reminded that to limit compassion to the borders of one's nationality, one's family, or even one's self is a migration toward disintegration. For those on a trajectory toward disintegration, a theology of migration does not make much sense, since it will always be news from a foreign land. But if the term "alien" is to be used at all, it would be descriptive not of those who lack political documentation but of those who have so disconnected themselves from God and others that they are incapable of seeing in the vulnerable stranger a mirror of themselves, a reflection of Christ, and a challenge to human solidarity.

Daniel G. Groody, C.S.C., is associate professor of theology and director of the Center for Latino Spirituality and Culture at the University of Notre Dame. His recent publications reflect his interest in the intersection of globalization, immigration, and theology: *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (2002); *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace* (2007); and the edited collections, *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (2007), *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (2008, with Gioacchino Campese); *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Spiritual Writings* (2011); and *The Option for the Poor Beyond Theology* (2013, with Gustavo Gutiérrez). He is also the executive producer of various documentary films, including "Dying to Live: A Migrant's Journey." More information is available at <http://kellogg.nd.edu/faculty/fellows/dgroody/index.shtml>.