

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Stepping Out of the Brain Drain: Applying Catholic Social Teaching in a New Era of Migration

Michele R. Pistone and John J. Hoeffner

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The Catholic Church has always asserted a very broad right to migrate that is rooted in both the dignity of migrants and in their poverty. In this book, Michele Pistone and John Hoeffner note the “great exception” to this support: Catholic popes and bishops are often ambivalent about, and sometimes hostile to, the emigration of skilled workers from underdeveloped countries. I have heard this ambivalence firsthand in the comments of a bishop who suggested reparations payments from the United States to the Philippines for the loss of skilled workers through migration. Pistone and Hoeffner make a compelling argument that this ambivalence is unjustified—that the emigration of skilled immigrants is good for sending countries as well as for receiving countries. This finding suggests that if religious leaders insist on taking policy positions on immigration they should not advocate policies that restrict skilled migration from poor countries. Although the authors do not question the involvement of bishops in politics, their thesis can be used to question the prudence of this involvement and of the practice of including judgments of fact and practice under the heading of Catholic social teaching.

In chapter 4, “The Openness of the Tradition and the Exception,” the authors document the longstanding support of the Catholic hierarchy for immigration, with the aforementioned exception. This exception is grounded in the concurrent concern about the development of third-world countries and the economic harm that is done to sending countries from the loss of human resources—both entrepreneurial and technical. This “brain drain” was

a recurring concern in the 1960s; it represented a potential threat to the common good posed by the migration of one class of people.

The central chapters of this book argue that the emigration of skilled workers is a large net benefit to developing countries in the current circumstances of easy communication and global commerce and that the negative effects of brain drain were overstated in the past. The negative effects were exaggerated in the 1960s and 1970s because theoretical models ignored the continuing commercial and cultural connections between émigrés and their home countries and because of a lack of data on the large rates of return migration. As these theoretical and empirical shortcomings have been addressed, the benefits of skilled emigration have become more evident.

When skilled emigrants leave a country, they usually do not separate themselves from communities in their home countries; neither do they separate themselves from similar emigrants in the countries to which they move. Instead, they form diasporas—overseas immigrant communities. Even those who never plan to return home maintain familial and cultural ties with the sending country. These overseas networks foster ongoing transfers of knowledge, money, and technology from skilled migrants to home countries.

The authors offer several telling examples. In one, overseas communities return home with skills that they use to start businesses. That one of the cases involves Indian migrants returning from Korea with ideas and technical know-how in the textile industry (31) highlights the fact that the United States need not be the receiving country. Agricultural researchers such as Keerti Rathore at Texas A&M (159) use their expertise in creative ways to address technological challenges in their home countries. This combination of third-world experience and first-world technological training benefits both sending and receiving countries.

The volume of monetary transfers speaks for itself: \$150 billion in remittances to poor countries—twice the amount of foreign aid, and better targeted, because remittances go directly to poor people without being skimmed off by rent-seekers (143–44). Direct monetary transfers from emigrants to home countries are important: Emigrants are active investors in their home countries. Their presence in U.S. corporations makes it much easier and natural for American companies to invest overseas also.

By arraying such a large and convincing body of evidence, Pistone and Hoeffner have demolished any grounds for resisting the emigration of skilled workers from developing countries. Accordingly, they conclude, “the time is ripe for the Church to revise its position in STEP OUT [skilled] migration” (191). It is at this point that the authors’ excellent work raises important questions, largely unexamined in their work or anyone else’s. What does it mean for the Church (meaning the pope and bishops) to have a position? Why did the Church ever have a position on skilled emigration in the first place? Should we include judgments on empirical matters, such as the effects of emigration, in what we call Catholic social teaching?

The authors draw a helpful distinction in chapter 5, “Foundational Principles.” Catholic social *doctrine* consists of the foundation principles of Catholic social teaching—human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, and the universal destination of goods,

for example. Catholic social *teaching* contains both the doctrines and their application to specific circumstances—judgments about whether or not the principles are being violated and about the efficacy of certain policies in bringing about justice.

Pistone and Hoeffner do not wish to change Catholic social *doctrine*, but they do want to change Catholic social *teaching*, and they take pains to make the distinction clear. They have convinced me that skilled migration is a great benefit to sending countries, but I do not want the Church to start teaching this contingent fact as part of Catholic social teaching.

What Pistone and Hoeffner call Catholic social doctrine—the foundational principles—I would call Catholic social teaching. I am loath to call empirical judgments about the effects of emigration and prudential judgments about government policies toward migration Catholic teaching at all. The church should teach about emigration, welfare reform, and a host of other public policy questions in only the most contingent, qualified way.

Of course, bishops cannot teach the principles of social doctrine without making some gestures toward application. However, Catholics of good will, who are equally committed to Catholic social doctrine, can and will disagree about empirical facts and about the most effective policies. Should their disagreement be cast as disagreement with Catholic teaching? More importantly, bishops and popes can be wrong about the “facts on the ground” of social policy. After all, they were wrong to think that the brain drain was harmful to sending countries, as Pistone and Hoeffner have demonstrated.

The broad construal of Catholic social teaching to include its application implies that the legitimate episcopal charism to teach inspires contestable empirical judgments and prudential implementation. Those who disagree with the bishops on the application may call into question the validity of the Catholic principles themselves. I interpret the message of this book as a caution to bishops on the advisability of branding particular policy positions as Catholic.

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Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible

M. Daniel Carroll R.

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The author of *Christians at the Border* is an Old Testament scholar who is a bicultural American (born of a Guatemalan mother and American father). His goal is to address the issue of immigration from the perspective of Christian theology. He observes that economic and political ideologies presently dominate the discussion.

Latino immigration to the United States is not a recent phenomenon. The Southwest was Spanish territory until 1848. While there was always movement across the Mexican–U.S. border, a major influx of Latinos occurred after 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act