

We should not forget our immigration history

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We come from a background of wandering people. Somewhere in the past our ancestors were immigrants. Many of them were refugees. Yet, it is in our nature to forget that experience and to treat every new wave of strangers as though we had never seen strangers before or been strangers ourselves.

I should start by looking at one particular wave of strangers. They were refugees, desperate beyond all imagining. Turned from their homes by hunger and a brutal regime, they crowded onto boats to face weeks and months at sea. What followed was a nightmare. Some boats sank with all on board; others ran out of food and water. None had enough sanitary facilities for all their passengers. When people sickened and died, there was nothing to do but throw their bodies overboard. By the time the boats reached land, their human cargo was riddled with fever. Countless men, women and children died within sight of the promised land.

They were Irish refugees escaping from the Great Hunger, and this was 1847 – the very foundation year that we are commemorating today. The shores to which they came were Canadian shores.

The reactions of the host nation were, in hindsight, sadly familiar. Concerned citizens petitioned the government to halt the flow, press editorials warned of catastrophe if there was no legislative action against the immigration. Protest meetings were held. The government looked the other way and practiced neither prevention nor anticipation. Once the refugees had arrived, their desperate condition, and the typhus that they carried, made most Canadians anxious to keep them at arm's length.

Through this negative response, understandable though tragic, there was threaded another response of pure gold. In Montreal and Bytown, the Grey Nuns, and in Kingston the Hospitallers of Saint Joseph, went to work with the sick and the orphaned children. They, and everyone else who worked with the refugees, risked contagion. In Montreal, eight priests died as well as the vicar general; so did the mayor of that city and the bishop of Toronto – all because they visited the sick in the fever sheds. But the general public reaction was far from welcoming.

With time, the Irish immigrants found their feet and took their place in Canadian history. But immigrant history continued to be made, as the 19th century turned into the 20th, and wave after wave of newcomers descended on our port cities. They came now not only from the British Isles but further afield: continental Europe, Russia and Asia. Many of them travelled straight on into the heartland of Canada while others settled in cities where there was work to be found. For all of these immigrants, the early years were heavy and hard.

The city and the churches of Ottawa remained more or less untouched by all of this. Relatively few immigrants came here, and those who did had to make their way as best as they could. It was not so much that established Catholic parishes were hostile to newcomers, they were simply insensitive.

I have a story to illustrate what I mean by insensitivity. In the early 1930s, a German couple, newly arrived in Ottawa, decided to go to mass in the Basilica. At the door of the church they were met by something new to them: a demand for a pew rent. Pew rent, you may recall, was a very small fee, usually 10 cents per person, for the use of space in the church. The couple either didn't have the 20 cents or didn't realize they were expected to pay it. They were asked to leave.

This is an irony to this story: the German couple's son is now the pastor of the Basilica.

After World War II, the wave of immigration picked up, and the city saw the appearance of more newcomers than ever before. Many were "displaced persons"; others were simply on the run from the desperate economic conditions of post-war Europe. As has always been the way of immigrants, these newcomers tended at first to cluster together, and this made it possible for the archdiocese to help them erect their own faith communities. The Italian community, which has had its own church since 1913, grew prodigiously while in the early 1950s other communities came into being, German-speaking, Dutch and Polish. Still, the host Catholic community (if we may call it that), generally kept its distance. The gospel imperative -- to welcome the stranger -- drew only a faint response.

In 1952, things began to change. The Montreal office of Catholic Immigrant Services International, in the process of reorganizing itself, established a part-time contact in the Archdiocese of Ottawa. From now on basic services were available to immigrants in our city. This came none too soon because only a few years later, in 1956, a wave of refugees began arriving -- a sudden, very large wave of Hungarians, fleeing from Communist oppression in their homeland. In all, over 37,000 Hungarians found refuge in Canada. Canadians of all kinds, including many Ottawans, opened their doors to total strangers.

We can attribute this new openness to several different developments. First, the economic well-being of the 1950s; second, the hostility of Canadians towards all things Communist; then as well, the official definition in 1951 by the United Nations of what constitutes a refugee: "a well-founded fear of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group." From now on the refugee had a profile, he was legitimate in our minds. There was also the growing media coverage of world events. Increasingly, from one crisis to the next, the raw reality of other people's suffering was being displayed before our eyes. It called forth our compassion in a very human way.

As a result, homes and jobs were found, in our city as in others, for hundreds of Hungarians. But it must be emphasized that this was largely an ad hoc effort carried out by volunteers. Once the crisis was over, Ottawa went back to business as usual. Immigrants still arrived, though in diminished numbers -- a few hundred a year -- and Ottawans more or less ignored them.

If there was any heightened consciousness about the problems and needs of newcomers, it was maintained in two small organizations: the youthful Catholic Immigration Services and the Ottawa Interfaith Committee on Immigrants. The Catholic Immigration Service, a creation of the Archdiocese, offered basic services to the strangers who came to its doors. The Interfaith Committee, made up of representatives from major churches, struggled to fashion a more general welcome service for all immigrants arriving in our city, a welcome which would begin with a card in the mail and continue with a

visit by a volunteer. This project lasted several years, with considerable expenditure of effort, if you count the number of cards sent out and people knocking on doors. But the return was discouraging. Less than 10 per cent of the cards sent out received a response, and the visitors often found that by the time they got to the doors, their people had already moved on. In 1973, the Committee wondered aloud whether it was simply acting in a “prophetic” role, far out in front of the people it was trying to serve.

Perhaps this was truer than anyone knew at the time. Gradually, by trial and error, the Committee was building a broader mandate for itself on which succeeding organizations would inherit. First, the personal contacts between visitors and newcomers were leading to a clearer understanding of newcomer needs. The Committee learned, for instance, that jobs were a priority, but, for immigrants, difficult to find. It sent out an appeal to the various service clubs of Ottawa, asking for tips on job-finding (incidentally, nobody answered). Secondly, the committee began to take on an advocacy role. In 1975, it submitted a brief on the new Green Paper on Immigrations, condemning what it saw as hidden racism. Only one brief among others, but it meant that from now on, the Christian community of Ottawa had an official voice, and it was a pro-immigrant voice.

By this time the Interfaith committee had acquired a valuable asset: Sister Therese Dallaire, of the Filles de la Sagesse. She was already in charge of the Catholic Immigration Service; she now also took on the role of coordinator of the Interfaith Committee, a role which she continued until her resignation for reasons of ill health in 1978. It is appropriate here to signal the contribution of the religious orders, particularly the Filles de la Sagesse and the Soeurs de la Charite to the development of our immigrant services. They were there at the beginning, they are there still. Sister Dallaire has died but her name lives on in the Maison Dallaire in downtown Ottawa, the first shelter in Canada for hundreds of refugees each year. (Note: Since the publication of this article, the name of this house has been changed to Maison Sophia Reception House).

During her early years with the Catholic Immigration Service, Sister Dallaire was the only full-time worker in the field here in Ottawa. At first she maintained an office on Nicholas Street. In 1976, her one-woman job gave way to a larger organization, with offices in the diocesan centre and a Board of Directors to provide policy guidance and to interface with the Archdiocese. The new organization’s constitution clearly laid out its objectives: to receive and welcome immigrants, to offer them information and referral advice, to act as an advocate when advocacy was needed. And quite clearly, from the very beginning, everyone recognized that its work could go forward only if there were volunteers to promote it. The inclusion of the larger Catholic community in the work of immigrant settlement was a must.

So now the message began to go out to the troops. Father Peter Schonenbach, chairman of the board as well as pastoral coordinator of the English section of the Archdiocese, used his weekly newsletters to inform the parishes of the organization’s work. Gradually, the idea was being driven home that welcoming the stranger – not just passively accepting him, but actively drawing him in – was a true Christian imperative.

Still, in many respects the Interfaith Committee and the Catholic Immigration Service, with their bundle of devoted volunteers, remained, as it were, lights set upon a candlestick, clear for everyone to see, but solitary in their operation. The number of Ottawans who shared their activity – or even sympathized with it – was very limited. The public mood seemed to be settling in against immigrants. In 1977, an official of the United Nations, addressing the Interfaith Committee, warned that Canada was closing its doors, that “asylum seekers expect help and cannot get it.” Ottawa itself was going into a slump as the decentralization of federal government department resulted in the emptying of downtown office space and the loss of jobs. Serious people doubted the city’s ability to absorb strangers.

However, events were taking place elsewhere which were to change all this. The victory of the communists in the Vietnam war, and the dreadful dislocation and genocide which ravaged Cambodia and Laos, forced hundreds of thousands of people onto the move. In 1975, the first Vietnamese appeared in Ottawa, among the Chileans and Haitians who had previously been Sister Dallaire’s chief concern. Between January and September 1975, more than 2,000 new Canadians came to live in Ottawa. Many of these were refugees, lacking even the personal belongings which most immigrants are able to bring with them. In an effort to meet their needs, a furniture and clothing depot was opened in the parish hall of Christ-Roi by a group of concerned citizens led by Simone Couture. Within four months it had served a 100 refugee families. This marked a promising development: first, the leadership, and second, the ready response, of volunteers in the case of a specific need. This readiness would be of critical importance in the coming years.

Between 1975 and 1977, the trickle of Indochinese refugees became a flood, astonishing a world community that was in no way prepared for it. The west had learned to withstand the distress of hundreds of thousands, as long as the distress was only described in print, but now they came before our eyes – on television and in newspaper pictures – and they assaulted our conscience. We saw them crammed in un-seaworthy boats, riding out on the open sea; we got close-ups of the old people and the children; we learned that for every desperate person who reached land, there were others who drowned at sea. Then, in the summer of 1978, we read that Vietnam’s Asian neighbours were refusing to accept more refugees and even turning them away at gunpoint. The newspapers expressed our outrage but the countries involved pointed out, quite reasonably, that their own resources were inadequate and that the rest of the world was doing precious little to help. There was truth in that: of the more than 350,000 refugees who made their way to their camps, the Government of Canada, albeit one of the more generous members of the world community, was only offering to take in a quota of 7,000, then 8,000, per year.

However, on April 10, 1978, an important event took place which was to widen the crack in Canada’s door. This was the new Immigration Act – an act more liberal and more positive in spirit than anything that had gone before. Among its provisions was one which set up the machinery for private sponsorships. From now on, any five individuals acting together, with a certain collective income, were entitled to sponsor refugees. Thus, in addition to the government’s own sponsorship, the Minister of Immigration opened the way for private sponsorships. He was going to get more than he bargained for: in the course of the 1980s, the number of private sponsorships of Indochinese refugees would equal, and then surpass, the number of government sponsorships.

It is noteworthy that one of the first groups to whom the minister explained the new Act was the national Interfaith Immigration Committee – a group, which in his words, “has played such an important role in helping immigrant settle in Canada.” In the coming years, religious organizations were to play an ever more active role, needling the government, exhorting the public, speaking out on behalf of refugees and immigrants.

Among these thorns in the government’s flesh was the board of the Catholic Immigration Service of Ottawa, which now became passionate advocates on the Indochinese refugees. The chairman of the board at this time was Richard Hardy, a professor at Saint Paul University. He had a personal attachment to the cause of the Cambodian refugees. In 1975, friends of his had adopted a Cambodian baby and had asked him to be its godfather. But the baby was sick from the outset, and soon died. In early 1976, a year to the day after the baby’s death, Dr. Hardy was asked by an international organization to sponsor an orphaned Cambodian teenager living in Paris. He agreed – and now began a long legal battle to bring the boy to Canada. Dr. Hardy learned that, whatever the appearances, the reality of sponsorship was difficult, almost impossible. He also learned a great deal about the Cambodian refugees in Thailand who had suffered atrociously but who remained less visible to the west than the Vietnamese.

In the fall of 1978, the Catholic Immigration Service, at his urging, took up the cause of the Cambodians. Members contacted, and often visited, the parishes of the diocese, promoting the idea of private sponsorship. They found a powerful ally in Archbishop Plourde. In January 1979, the archbishop visited the Thai refugee camps, and brought back, not only his word descriptions of the conditions there, but a Cambodian orphan to be his own adopted son. From now on he was a tireless advocate of sponsorship, pressing his people to do more, to do better. He argued that the indifference of the west – our indifference – was a scandal, that we simply had no right to turn away from such suffering. By April 1979, 14 sponsor groups had been set up within the diocese. But Archbishop Plourde was not satisfied. Under his urging and those of the Board, more and more parishes set up sponsor groups. The Archdiocese eased their way by signing an umbrella agreement which gave financial assistance to private sponsorships (28 June 1979). By September, 1979, there were 50 sponsor groups from Catholic parishes, and the number was still rising. In November, a special collection was held to support the work. Persistence paid off. By the following spring, the Catholic Immigration Service was preparing for the arrival of 230 Cambodians.

It must not be forgotten that all this was happening against a continuing barrage of horrendous news releases. To the stories of murder and rape told by the Vietnamese boat people, to the spectacle of their boats being driven back out to sea, was now harrowing tales of panic on the Thai border, as soldiers forced Cambodian men, women and children back onto the guns of the Khmer Rouge. During the Christmas season of 1978, the words “no room at the inn” haunted many of us. But what were these neighbouring countries to do in the face of such an invasion? They kept insisting that the west was not doing its part. And the statistics supported them. A trade-off which our government offered the Philippines in January 1979 is fairly typical: we would take 400 refugees off their hands if they would admit the 5,000 boat people waiting off their coast.

The government felt that its hands were tied. It knew not all Canadians favoured the entry of Indochinese refugees. Archbishop Plourde himself was confronted on an open line radio show by a woman who said simply: "Let them all die." And he knew full well that she was expressing the opinion of many others. In March, a Gallup poll had revealed that 52 per cent of adults questioned thought that the quota of 5,000 refugees was too high. Thus, the minister was caught between the resistance of many Canadians and the pro-active enthusiasm of others. The protagonists of refugee sponsorship suspected strongly that, in the actual work of clearing refugees to come to Canada, the government was dragging its feet. Sponsor groups waited, with their arms open but empty, as the months went by.

Now, in the summer of 1979, began an extraordinary chain of events. The mayor of Ottawa, Marion Dewar, a member of Saint Basil's Church and a long-time social activist, became impatient. She had been receiving enough calls from would-be sponsors and other sympathizers to know that other people were impatient, too. At the end of June, 1979, she met with immigration officials, and asked them why, with so many refugees waiting in the camps, and so many sponsors waiting here, the paperwork was proceeding so slowly. Why, when the government had promised a quota of 8,000 Indochinese refugees for the year, was it stuck at 4,000? The problem, she was told, was one of processing. In the course of the following conversation, she found herself saying that the city of Ottawa would take the remaining 4,000 and the sooner the better.

It was several days before Mayor Dewar was able to meet with her council, and during these days, Project 4000 moved of its own accord. Any apprehensions she might have had about its reception were quickly removed. Council agreed to back the project with office space and staff. The public's support was overwhelming. Phone lines to City Hall were jammed. On June 27, a public meeting was called to explain the process of sponsorship and it brought nearly 3,000 people to Lansdowne Park. Not only Ottawans were affected. Money donations began to come in from across the country. The city of Calgary, not to be outdone by Ottawa, announced its own project, Someone Cares. Thus, Ottawa's dynamism flowed into that being generated in other parts of the country. By early July 1979, 350 sponsor groups had signed up across Canada, two-thirds of them under the umbrella agreements of religious organizations. The pressure created by these movements induced the government very quickly to increase its Indochinese refugee quota to 25,000 and to streamline its selection process in the camps. A week later, it set the quotas for 1979-1980, of which 21,000 would be privately sponsored. This was the result of people power. The editor of the Citizen, Christopher Young, remarked that "the people of Canada are way out in front of their government on this question." As for Mayor Dewar, perhaps the finest compliment paid to her came from *Le Droit*, which said that she had acted "in one of these impulsive, spontaneous, uncalculated gestures which are the portion of Christian charity."

The first planeload of Vietnamese refugees in Ottawa arrived on August 6, 1979. Before the phase-out of Project 4000 was announced in October, 1980, some 3,300 Indochinese refugees would be brought to Ottawa, half of them by private sponsor groups. The process was not without its difficulties, both for the refugees and the sponsors. A project involving such numbers and undertaken at such short notice was bound to experience some hitches. But as Mayor Dewar remarked, if we had taken the time to prepare, "a lot of people would be at the bottom of the ocean." In any case, the problems should not detract from the project's overall success. The achievement of the Ottawa community, like that of the Canadian

people generally, was remarkable. A Toronto columnist, appraising the whole effort, would write, "Never before has the Canadian government depended on untrained, ordinary citizens to sponsor such a mass of refugees."

But this appraisal was off the mark. There were more than just government on the one hand, and untrained citizens on the other, involved in the effort of 1979-1980. There were private professionals, too. In addition to the doctors, dentists, ESL teachers and social workers, (many of them volunteers themselves), there were the agencies, which acted as liaison between the government and the public. One of these agencies was the Catholic Immigration Service.

Of all the people who worked hard that year, none could have worked harder than the people of the Catholic Immigration Service. They had a double function: they set up, and then supported and advised, private sponsorships; and they provided day-to-day assistance to government-sponsored refugees, who would otherwise have had to face the challenges of their new country almost alone.

One of the lessons learned in the course of Project 4000 was that the refugees who were cared for by private groups integrated more swiftly and with much less pain into Canadian society. The government-sponsored refugees received food and housing allowances, but lacked ongoing practical advice and emotional support. It was this that the staff of the Catholic Immigration Service and its volunteers now set about providing. We need only imagine what a North American hospital looked like to a woman in labour or the parents of a sick child, who spoke not a word of its language, to understand how much support was needed. In 1979 alone, the Catholic Immigration Service helped about 900 government-sponsored refugees to cope with these situations and others more commonplace, such as paying in their cheques at the bank or going to a rental office or buying clothes for the winter.

What was happening, in fact, was that a new kind of expertise was being developed -- what today we call settlement work. Nobody had anticipated the extent, or the variety, of the newcomers' needs. The Catholic Immigration Service learned as it went along, from the experience gained during Project 4000. One of the lessons it had learned was that newcomers need friends. In 1980, it started the Bridge of Friendship program, designed to provide government-sponsored refugees with Canadian mentors. This would later become the highly successful host program that we know today.

Just as suddenly as it started, Ottawa's extraordinary effort was over. A year after it was launched, the press was announcing that the Good Ship Project 4000 had come to port, with "its hull battered and crew weary, but its mission intact." We can carry the metaphor further, by remarking also that the wind had gone out of its sails. Voluntary efforts were faltering, new offers of sponsorship were few and far between. The good news was that, as they reached the end of their sponsorship year, the former refugees were stepping out into society with remarkable success. City authorities had predicted a post-sponsorship flood of demands for welfare and public housing; this did not materialize. Most families were self-supporting before the year was out. The boat people of 1979 were on the way to becoming the stable, solid citizens that we know today.

In December, 1980, the federal government announced that its special program to bring 60,000 Indochinese refugees to Canada had come to an end. The quota for the coming year would be 8,000. In

the same month, the city closed down Project 4000, handing all remaining tasks over to the Catholic Immigration Service and its partner, the Ottawa-Carleton Immigration Service. A radical downsizing was under way, in official policy – and also in public interest.

The Catholic Immigration Services shared in this downsizing, as the number of its workers, its funding and its public visibility dropped.

In the course of the 1980s, the Catholic Immigration Service redesigned itself. It surrendered its close connection to the Archdiocese and became the Catholic Immigration Centre, an incorporated, independent, community-based organization. This meant that in the following years it was able to expand its government funding, while at the same time retaining its traditional base of support among the parishes of the Archdiocese, and indeed, among many other Christian communities who have remained faithful to it throughout the years.

The host program, launched officially in 1986, has become highly successful with an average of 300 hosts per year. Private sponsorships, though diminished in number, are still encouraged and supported. The Catholic community can still rise to an occasion. We saw an example of this in 1990, when in the wake of the murder of the Jesuits in El Salvador, and the initiative of Archbishop Gervais, 50 Salvadoran refugees were brought to Ottawa at short notice, and settled in private homes in the parishes.

There have been other initiatives, which I suggest are the products of the experience of 1979-1980. One of the most important of these was the opening in 1988 of the Maison Dallaire on Boteler Street: a 3-unit reception house which offers newcomers a much gentler landing than the anonymous hotels of the Project 4000 days. The initial roadblocks which used to confront the boat people are now routinely dealt with: registration for social insurance and OHIP are taken care of, basic orientation is provided, and clothing and housing are found. But more than this, the Maison Dallaire offers its guests a glimpse of what we, as Canadians, hold dear; tolerance and respect for differences. Its dining room is a microcosm of a world which we, as Christians, would love to see: a world of men and women and children of all races and faiths, sitting down at the table together.

Then, in 1991, the Newcomer Centre was opened. This allowed for the development of a whole new range of services all under one roof. Since then, from year to year, the work of the Catholic Immigration Centre in the settlement and assistance of immigrants has grown and deepened. It now helps some 2,500 clients a year, with counselling and practical assistance and referrals to other agencies. It calls on the services of some 800 volunteers. Its host program continues to match Canadians with newcomers in a climate of friendship and mutual respect. There is not a lesson learned in the days of the Project 4000 that it has not turned to the advantage of all of us – Canadians and soon-to-be-Canadians.

The Catholic Immigration Centre is Catholic; its roots are in the Archdiocese and its parishes, and much of its financial and moral support comes from the same sources. But without surrendering that Catholic identity, its dedication is to a much broader clientele: “refugees and immigrants ... regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour or religion.”

This dedication, which posits a service of unconditional caring, for people with whom we have no natural connections, is not always an easy call for Catholics. We have always tended to be more comfortable within the protective walls of our own community and our own culture. But it is a call that the church makes repeatedly. In the summer of 1997, our Pope said it again to the young people of the world: "Our neighbour is every human being without exception. There is no point asking his nationality, his social or religious category. If he is in need, we must help him."

Our community is much closer to meeting this challenge than it was 50 years ago. We have become more open to newcomers. Our consciousness has been raised and we have many people to thank for that. But consciousness by itself is not enough. We have had an additional advantage: we have been given the practical means to put our good intentions into action.

Twenty years ago, the city of Ottawa, shaken by a truly generous humanitarian impulse, launched into a huge and highly successful sponsorship effort. But impulses have a way of fading. This one did, too, in its own good time. But the will to carry on, and the machinery to do it, continued, as the thousands of newcomers who have been welcomed by the Catholic Immigration Centre and its volunteers will attest. It is an achievement of which we can be proud, and a piece of history which we should not forget.

(In 2011, The Catholic Immigration Centre became the Catholic Centre for Immigrants Ottawa)

(This article was written in 2004 when the Catholic Centre for Immigrants marked its 50th anniversary)