The Church’s various understandings of globalization and development constitute an essential—and long-standing—background to its teaching on migration, especially to its treatment of economic-based migration.

GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is hard to define, but impossible to deny. Anyone old enough to remember even the 1980s knows that our ability to communicate, especially with people far away, and our ability to access information easily and cheaply, have increased exponentially over the last several decades. These developments, which have had such noticeable effect on the personal level, also have enabled notable changes on a larger scale, such as an increased intertwining of financial systems. Technological advances and changes in financial systems, accompanied and even propelled by massive political changes, also have produced a marked increase in the extent and reach of international trade. And all of these various changes, having in common that they appear to reduce the relevance of traditional national borders, have tended to reinforce each other and encourage further action along the same lines, such as the increasing establishment by corporations of factories, offices, and research centers beyond the borders of the corporations’ traditional domiciles (a process known by the descriptive if not always literally correct term, “off-shoring”).

The result has been a change in mindset, such that even globalization critics like the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, have recognized our era as one of “mandatory globalization.” To some—those who see the story of globalization mainly as one of welcome progress—the implications of “mandatory globalization” may seem thrilling. To others—those who view globalization’s destabilizing effects as primarily negative in character—the phrase may seem chilling. Catholic social teaching endorses neither of these strong positions in their entirety. Why not?

First, to the extent that strong support or opposition to globalization is based upon and presupposes a strong preference for a particular model of political and economic organization, Catholic social teaching—by its own acknowledgment—has no special competence to judge the matter. “The Church has no models to present”; it does not “propose economic and political systems.”

Nor does looking beyond globalization’s modes of organization and focusing instead on its effects offer the Church any basis for a definitive, overall conclusion about globalization. Concerning the extent of the progress that has been made in underdeveloped territories, the evidence is mixed. Certainly one should start with the understanding that, until recently, even in successful societies, most people lived at or barely above subsistence levels (in unsuccessful societies, people lived below subsistence levels, which means that they tended not to live very long). Recent troubles notwithstanding, the economic progress of the last forty years is thus truly remarkable—indeed, “the rapid and accelerating growth in per capita income” experienced in developing countries in that period is “without precedent in history.” In recognition of this growth, John Paul II emphasized that globalization was “not to be dismissed, since it can create unusual opportunities for greater prosperity.”

John Paul II also noted, however, that while “the processes which are globalization markets and communications do not in themselves possess an ethically negative connotation,” the “processes [of globalization] that, in principle, appear as factors of progress can have, and in fact already have had, ambivalent or decidedly negative consequences, especially to the detriment of the very poor.” The late pope’s reference to “ambivalent or decidedly negative consequences” is well taken, for there are many to choose from. Consider, for example, the fate of the very poorest countries in the age of globalization. Even in the face of strong overall growth in developing countries, the poorest countries in the world, with a combined population of over one billion, have had essentially no growth since 1970; indeed, in many of these places conditions continue to worsen.

Moreover, the “ambivalent or decidedly negative consequences” of globalization are not limited to the most troubled countries. Examples of this kind include the following:

- The globalization of agriculture has had a negative impact upon small farmers in many developing countries, as these farmers find it difficult to compete with large agricultural corporations who enjoy massive advantages of scale as well as the newest technologies. The small farmers’ difficulties are compounded by the extensive availability of agricultural subsidies in the developed world; over $300 billion a year in such payments are currently made to farmers in Europe, Japan, and the United States. In many developing countries, the difficulties of small farmers constitute a large societal problem, because small farmers constitute a sizable portion of the national labor force.

- The economic growth facilitated by globalization has resulted in an intensification of the global search for natural resources of all kinds. The results can benefit national economies; however, it can devastate local ones. Mining operations, for example, not only can upset traditional economic arrangements, in some cases they can obliterate them due, among other
The mobility of capital is a defining feature of globalization, but the same restlessness in the pursuit of ever-greater productivity that can motivate capital to enter a country also can cause it to flee elsewhere. The risk is the creation of a "race to the bottom," as capital uses its mobility as leverage to demand ever more advantageous conditions concerning labor standards, taxation, environmental regulation, and the like. To the extent that this risk materializes, globalization’s promise to raise global living standards is undermined. Moreover, at the same time, globalization’s inherently destabilizing effects are extended and reinforced, as multinational employers move in and move out, remaking labor markets both as they come and as they go. In addition, underscoring both the leverage of multinational corporations and the damage that their departure can do is the unfortunate fact that once traditional economic arrangements are dismantled they, like Humpty Dumpty, are not easily put back together again.

The common element in these examples is the disruption of local labor markets. One of the consequences of such disruption is migration, as workers move to where jobs can be found. In developing countries, the flow of internal migrants is predominantly from rural areas to large cities; internationally, the flow is largely to developed countries. The lure of paid work is the sine qua non of most of this migration, of course, with the extent and direction of the movement a function not only of disparities in economic development but also of the mirror-image demographics of developed and underdeveloped nations. (In short, while “virtually all of the world’s population growth is taking place in developing countries,” the so-called birth dearth in developed countries “threatens their ability to sustain current levels of economic growth and to maintain their existing pensions and social security systems,” i.e., developed countries need workers born elsewhere.)

The current demographic pattern (which is expected to endure for at least several more generations) suggests that the globalization of labor—its movement from the underdeveloped to the developed world—is, economically at least, a mutually beneficial arrangement. However, while relatively positive consequences can flow from this movement, further decidedly negative ones do as well. For example:

1) Because paths of legal immigration are limited, despite the economic and demographic need, migrants seeking work often must proceed without official travel authorization. Several consequences result, the first being that their migration journeys to and across borders often expose them to great danger. With the usual travel routes closed to them, undocumented travelers seek out persons engaged in the business of human smuggling. The animal names used to refer to such smugglers—snakeheads and coyotes—fairly suggest the danger of the environment undocumented migrants must enter. Indeed, thousands of people die each year attempting clandestine border crossings, including several hundred per year at the U.S.-Mexico border, while others are robbed, assaulted, or severely injured.

2) Beyond the risks of death, crime, and serious injury, undocumented migrants also suffer from numerous forms of exploitation. One of the worst forms is trafficking, in which persons are enticed to migrate by lavish promises, only to find themselves upon arrival in situations of forced or bonded labor or sexual servitude. Approximately 800,000 people per year are trafficked across international borders. The U.S. Department of State has attributed at least part of the recent expansion of the trafficking problem to “[t]he globalization of markets and labor forces, and the concomitant relaxation of travel barriers.”

3) Even migrants who are not trafficked are subject to exploitation after they arrive at their destination. Undocumented immigrants of every nationality, for example, often fall prey to fraudulent legalization schemes promulgated by unscrupulous persons who hold themselves out as legal specialists, perhaps even as lawyers. These operators, known as “notarios” in Spanish-speaking communities, charge clients thousands of dollars for non-existent or hopelessly futile services, such as filing legalization claims pursuant to legislative proposals that have not been enacted. Notarios are also notorious for losing difficult or impossible to duplicate paperwork essential to filing legitimate claims.

4) In another example of post-arrival exploitation, in law as well as in fact, undocumented migrant workers are subject to lower labor and employment standards and have fewer health and wage protections than other workers. The disproportionate concentration of undocumented workers in dirty and dangerous jobs compounds the difficulties—not to say the injustices—that these lower standards can create, even as those difficulties are perpetuated by undocumented workers’ restricted ability to challenge the circumstances of their employment through organization or through the judicial system.
(5) In addition, migrations that avoid the worst forms of exploitation (and even those that might otherwise be regarded as "successful") are not lacking in negative consequences. For instance, migrations of every kind tear persons away from the comforts of a familiar culture and separate husbands from wives and parents from their children, while substantial migrations additionally can split and even decimate communities. To the extent that globalization necessitates and facilitates migration, these decidedly negative consequences are appropriately attributed to it.

(6) Finally, while undocumented immigration by relatively unskilled workers is one characteristic of migration in the current age of globalization, another is the largely legal immigration of skilled workers. There is no question that individual members of this second, significantly smaller but very important group of migrants, for the most part avoid the worst hardships faced by undocumented migrants. And there also is very widespread agreement that skilled migration economically benefits receiving countries, as it also delivers many benefits to skilled migrants themselves. Sending countries, however, and the people left behind in them, may sometimes suffer—at least in the short term—when a substantial number of their population's most skilled workers depart. This is particularly true of poor countries and their inhabitants, as poor countries are more likely than rich ones to lack qualified substitute workers.

Given all this, and given that there is no compelling reason to believe as of yet that the "decidedly negative consequences" of globalization are mere growing pains—perhaps they are more the proverbial canary in the coal mine—there is ample cause to be wary of globalization's effects, even as benefits of globalization are recognized. Accordingly, as to the "fact" of globalization, as to the globalization that is, Catholic social teaching is appropriately neither an enemy nor a cheerleader of the phenomenon taken as a whole. And yet there is a sense in which the Church is and must be the foremost advocate of globalization. It believes, after all, in a universal natural law, and it declares itself a universal church to whom no person is a stranger. It has been charged by its founder with a universal evangelizing mission—to go and present the entire "good news" of Jesus Christ and the Church, to all peoples in every age. The Catholic social teaching is that it does not conform to established partisan frameworks of which we are all familiar and to which many of us tend to adhere. (Limiting ourselves only to life and health issues, would any political party be comfortable endorsing the Church's positions on war and assisted suicide, abortion and the death penalty, and health care and stem cell medical research?) Rather than subscribe to any purely partisan view, Catholic social teaching aims to provide "a broader horizon" that inspires and benefits the world as people apply it to their lives and work.°

On the topic of development, for persons in the developed world the key insight of Catholic social teaching is that one must not think of development merely as something that must happen "out there," in the nether regions of China or India, or in poor nations one hears about only when natural disasters or man-made brutalities turn particularly costly. To think about development only in this way—even when accompanied by wishes and sympathies for, and the occasional donation to, the less fortunate—is to have a diminished understanding of what it means to be human, and leads as inevitably to distortions in developed countries as it does to hardships in underdeveloped ones.

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (On Social Concern), a 1987 encyclical by John Paul II, is the primary teaching document on "the development of individuals and peoples," along with Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples), a 1967 encyclical by Paul VI. Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (which was intended to commemorate and update Populorum Progressio) does not offer—in fact, it states that the Church does not have—technical solutions "for the problem of underdevelopment." Following Populorum Progressio.