

Inundated

Our metaphors reveal what we think about immigration.

[Brett C. Hoover](#)

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[Immigration](#)

[Religion](#)

[Politics](#)

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Migrants wade through the Rio Grande traveling from Mexico into Eagle Pass, Texas, October 6, 2023 (OSV News photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters).

Fifteen years ago, while doing field research in a parish transformed by immigration from Mexico, I asked Anglo parishioners what they thought about the changes in their community. One middle-aged man told me he had no problem with immigration from Mexico, as long as their small Midwestern city was not, as he put it, “inundated.” I was struck by the ambiguity in the metaphor. On the one hand, as any engineer or insurance agent will tell you, inundation or flooding is a practical problem, a matter of logistics and infrastructure. Rainfall exceeds what systems can handle. Basements flood; levees break. But inundation can also be viewed as a belonging problem. Water, mud, and even, at times, sewage or toxins end up where they are not supposed to be.

Recent increases in the number of migrants trying to cross the border bring that ambiguity back to mind. Since at least the 1970s, pundits and politicians on the Right have warned of floods of migrants, people “storming” the border (as if the nation were the Bastille), immigration as invasion, the possibility of the country reaching maximum capacity, or even a Reconquista of California, which was once part of Mexico. Democrats sound the alarm about numbers less frequently, and they usually resort to milder metaphors such as a “surge” (think Obama in 2014), suggesting unusually large ocean waves.

In recent weeks, we have heard the embattled mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, argue that blue-state metropolitan areas have reached their limits in providing for asylum seekers. “We are at capacity,” Adams has said on multiple occasions, as his Democratic colleagues in places like Chicago, Maine, and Massachusetts join him in asking for more federal help. The numbers of migrants arriving in these places are large. According to the *New York Times*, more than one hundred thousand migrants arrived in New York City in 2023, many by bus from Texas. Housing them costs the city billions of dollars, partly because of a 1981 consent decree that established a right to shelter. Many of those migrants hail from Venezuela, an economically devastated country with fewer immigrants already in the United States and thus relatively few family members to host them.

Much has also been made of the more than 240,000 monthly “encounters” between migrants and Border Patrol at the end of 2023, closer to three hundred thousand in December. These Homeland Security numbers are harder to interpret. They don’t take account of people caught and deported by Border Patrol who then try to cross again—and are thus “encountered” more than once. They also reflect the trend of migrants purposefully turning

themselves in to Border Patrol hoping to apply for asylum. In previous eras of immigration, crossing the border was largely about trying to *avoid* getting caught by Border Patrol.

Anti-immigrant forces on the Right hope that these numbers will frighten American voters into seeing the increase in migrants arriving in the United States not as a logistical or humanitarian challenge but as a crisis of national belonging and identity. This is “inundation” interpreted as dirty water that doesn’t belong. MAGA Republicans contend that today’s migrants, especially those from Latin America and from Muslim nations, bring values and attitudes antithetical to U.S. society. Donald Trump began his 2016 presidential campaign branding Mexican immigrants as criminal invaders. As president, he decried the preponderance of migrants from poorer or non-European countries, employing a scatological metaphor to describe homelands like Haiti. More recently, Trump campaign officials have floated proposals to massively increase deportations, to make asylum all but impossible, to ban migration from Muslim countries, and to once again reduce the number of refugees to near zero. The not-so-subtle implication is that it is better to have no immigrants at all than to bring in people from less affluent and majority-nonwhite nations.

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This specific brand of xenophobia has a long history in our nation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, immigration reached an all-time peak of 15 percent of the population. (Today, that number is 13.7 percent.) A bout of nativism erupted, targeting Asian, Eastern European, and Southern European immigrants. The dominance of the “Nordic” (Northern and Western European) culture of the United States was presumed to be under attack. An oxymoronic “scientific racism” made bogus claims about Nordic superiority, and a renewed Ku Klux Klan amassed political power—including at least one governorship—with the express intention of keeping out Catholics, Jews, and Asians. Xenophobia and more traditional forms of racism worked in concert. The Jim Crow caste system in the South gained legal approbation, Woodrow Wilson segregated the federal government, and lynching as an act of racial terror went unprosecuted. By 1924, Congress had engineered federal immigration law by instituting discriminatory quotas that drastically limited migration from Eastern and Southern Europe and barred Asian immigration

entirely. What had been an enormous logistical challenge was turned into a racial and ethnic emergency.

We must make sure that this “dirty water” interpretation of the numbers does not dominate our thinking about immigration today. But even if we all see migration as a “logistical challenge,” we must remember that we Americans bear significant responsibility for this challenge. Both Republicans and Democrats created “tough-on-crime” deportation policies that sent thousands of MS-13 and Calle 18 gang members back to Central America, where they unsurprisingly recreated the gangs they had known in California. These gangs have established a profitable extortion business, forcing their fellow citizens north when they cannot afford to pay any more. Moreover, both independent research and government investigations show that Mexican organized-crime cartels procure their weapons from U.S. sellers, and then use those weapons to threaten or kill anyone in their way. On past visits to a migrant shelter in Tijuana with my students, we have met countless families seeking asylum in the United States after such run-ins. U.S. government policies and the actions of U.S.-based multinational corporations also drive economically motivated migration, such as when subsidized agriculture in the United States edges out small farmers in Mexico and Central America, or when U.S. sanctions exacerbate the economic mismanagement in Venezuela or Cuba.

As the social ethicist Tisha Rajendra points out, many Americans, even many ethicists, think of newly arriving migrants essentially as strangers. Welcoming them, then, is kindness, even if that kindness is also a Christian duty for some of us. But Rajendra argues that if the U.S. government or U.S. corporations have helped to create the conditions that spurred migration, we cannot really think of them as strangers. International relationships create responsibilities. If our nation has acted in ways that brought migrants to our door, we can’t insist that they are not our problem. Attempts to shuffle challenges off onto other countries, such as the “Remain in Mexico” policy of the previous administration, or current efforts to enlist Mexican authorities in turning back migrants, are even more shameful. Ethical nations, like ethical persons, take responsibility for their actions.

We already know what meeting the logistical challenge would look like. Border states and cities like New York genuinely need federal help, though that would require Congress to authorize additional spending. Alternatives to asylum at the border in various parts of Latin America, such as the provisions established by the Biden administration for Cubans and Venezuelans with U.S. sponsors, need scaling up. Congress could relax work-permit requirements for

asylum seekers. The famously glitchy CBP One app, through which asylum seekers had to secure appointments to enter the United States, has gotten better, but improvements in capacity and efficiency are still needed. Above all, Congress must increase investment on the processing side, perhaps something more like the dramatic increases in Border Patrol funding after 9/11, to create the number of immigration courts and judges required to meet demand. In a less polarized environment, at least some of the necessary funding could come from the elimination of ineffective and often expensive enforcement measures such as border fencing. Does Border Patrol really need nearly twice as many agents as the FBI? Lower birth rates and a stronger economy in Mexico have arguably done more to reduce the undocumented population than all the military-style border enforcement. And that enforcement, which is meant to keep people out, might actually end up keeping people in the United States who would prefer to go back. People stay for fear of never being able to return.

In the Hebrew Bible, upwards of thirty-six Torah passages require God's people to be hospitable toward ancient immigrants, who are known in Hebrew as the *gerim* (often translated as "resident aliens" or "strangers"). A large number of these directives explicitly compare the vulnerability of these newcomers to the memory of the Israelites' own time as enslaved *gerim* in Egypt. "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). Prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah echo the refrain. Given that many of the ancestors of today's Americans were also once *gerim* here in the United States, would not these ancestors be disappointed in us, knowing that we let a crisis of logistics get in the way?