

# Deciphering 'foreign' labels and hidden attitudes

When I was growing up, the word "alien" conjured up images of "E.T." or the "one-eyed, one-horned flying purple people eater." All the human beings coming to our shores from other lands were considered "immigrants."

Somehow in more recent years, perhaps due to the technical verbiage of federal law, "immigrants" have been deemed "aliens."

This shift in terminology, of course, tends to make some people think of others as non-people. In fact, those who come to our country from other nations share the same hopes and dreams for themselves and their families as we do, and as all of our own ancestors did.

We often fear what we don't understand, be it a foreign language or a cultural custom. However, as we come to meet each other on a one-to-one basis, we discover that there is so much more that unites us than divides us.

This is the spirit of the Church's annual National Migration Week, observed at this time of year in recollection of the visit of the three wise men (foreigners, aliens?) to the Holy Family in Bethlehem. Although they did not share the Jewish faith, they were keen enough to have read the Hebrew prophecies and to have made the connection when they saw the special star that they considered it was well worth a journey with gifts for someone they would never have otherwise met or even thought to adore.

My parish of Saint John the Evangelist in Bergenfield keeps me in touch with the beautiful traditions of at least some of the 55 countries represented in our congregation. From the early morning novena before Christmas of the Filipino Simbang Gabi (yes, 250 people for 5 a.m. Mass each day) to the more traditional European and American practices of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to the pageantry of the Three Kings celebration of our Spanish community, I can't help but appreciate the richness of our Catholic faith and the many ways of expressing it.

As Pope Benedict XVI said in his homily in Washington, D.C., on April 17, 2008: "Two hundred years later, the Church in America can rightfully praise the accomplishment of past generations in bringing together widely differing immigrant groups within the unity of the Catholic faith and in a common commitment to the spread of the Gospel. At the same time, conscious of its rich diversity, the Catholic community in this country has come to appreciate ever more fully the importance of each individual and group offering its own particular gifts to the whole.

"The Church in the United States is now called to look to the future, firmly grounded in the faith passed on by previous generations, and ready to meet new challenges—challenges no less demanding than those faced by your forebears, with the hope born of God's love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5)."

In our own day, it is our task to live what Jesus taught in such a loving way that our children and grandchildren will have a faith to cherish and a desire to live it and pass it along.

As the bishops of our country reminded in 2000 in their document, "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity," the Church of the 21st century "will be, as it has always been, a Church of many cultures, languages and traditions, yet simultaneously one, as God is one—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—unity in diversity."

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## SEEING & BELIEVING

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