



A Story of Immigration and Emigration (part 2)

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the Continental Congress never offered George Washington a king's crown. The immigrant make-up of the colonies was so diverse religiously and by national origin that federal powers took second place to individual states' rights. The country would be a democracy with civilian rather than military rule and an elected president with limited powers rather than a monarch or dictator.

Venezuela's story after gaining independence from Spain was quite different, largely due to a far more limited immigrant pool. Europeans other than those of Spanish descent were almost non-existent. Lacking diversity of backgrounds, Venezuela retained the social hierarchy that existed during its colonial period. Venezuela was not to become a land of promise where the masses could rise to power and prosperity. Independence was effectively a transfer of power from the crown to Spanish-lineage aristocrats and military strongmen.

As mentioned in last week's article, immigration to the U.S. through the 19th century came predominantly from Europe. That continued as 80% of the 28 million immigrants in the first three decades of the 20th century were of European ancestry. In recent decades the face of immigration has changed. Fewer than 15% now come from Europe. Mexico, India, China, Vietnam, Philippines, and Middle East countries now top the list and have come in such numbers that the percentage of foreign born residents rose from 4.7% in 1970 to 12.9% in 2010. Take a drive down University Avenue in St. Paul or Lake Street in Minneapolis and visit the shopping centers for a taste of the "United Nations" diversity that is now Minnesota.

Venezuelan natives had used petroleum for medicine and waterproofing canoes long before the Spanish arrived, but it wasn't until after World War I that Venezuela began to exploit its extensive oil reserves. In a few short decades the economy shifted from agriculture to petroleum, from a rural to an urban society. Following World War II Venezuela began to actively recruit agricultural and skilled workers from Spain, Portugal, and Italy, but the majority of immigrants, particularly those entering illegally, came from neighboring Colombia seeking a better life in oil-rich Venezuela. The ensuing years had their ups and downs both economically and politically, but it wasn't until 2015 that the story of immigration in Venezuela took a drastic turn as the economy began spiraling downward at a horrific rate. Venezuela has gone from being a nation of immigrants to a nation of emigrants, similar to Ireland during the potato famine and Syria in more recent years. Exact numbers are hard to determine, but estimates for the past six years range up to 6 million or 20% of the population having emigrated, not counting citizens of other countries who have returned to their homelands.

Until professors joined the diaspora, a degree from Venezuelan universities and vocational schools was highly respected around the world. Able to find employment in foreign lands, the skilled professionals so badly needed for any future recovery have left at a much higher rate than that 20% figure. I asked many parishioners if they had family members living in other countries. One woman paused and began counting on her fingers: Chicago and Houston in the U.S., Ecuador, Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Chile. All left Venezuela in the past five years. Although not as extensive, her story is repeated by almost all those who responded.

My ancestors emigrated from Denmark, Ireland and Germany four or five generations back. Such lands of origin are, as with most Minnesotans, places of interest to maybe visit and make contact with distant relatives, but for our first generation immigrant ancestors that relationship was quite different. Having immigrated to this land of promise, they were expected to / blessed to help support those back home. Help they did, sending significant amounts of money through the mail or with friends returning to the homeland. When Western Union added money transfers to their cross-channel telegraph service in 1871, they became the major vehicle for remissions. Such is the current reality of my Hispanic friends, first generation immigrants in Minnesota, and for Venezuelans who have left their homeland in these past five years. The money they send back to support their families...over \$3.5 billion this past year...may be small in comparison to the \$35 billion that Mexicans in the U.S. sent home last year, but it sure helps put food on the tables of many families in our parish.

Points to ponder

Is there diversity in your neighborhood and parish? What are the challenges and blessings of such diversity?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.