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Churches' Call to "Love the Stranger" Includes Illegals

By Dan Ramirez

"When two days had passed without any word from them, we knew that they had gotten lost. The brethren began to pray for God to watch over my two little sons."

As she filled out her family's citizenship applications, Hermana Socorro (Sister Refuge) recalled how God had watched over her teen-aged sons' border crossing from Mexico several years ago. When the *migra* (Border Patrol) swooped down around them, the migrant boys had hidden in the mountainous terrain to await the coyote's (smuggler) instructions. Miraculously, a guardian angel appeared — an *hermano* (brother) from her Apostolic church who had often stayed at their family's home in Michoacan. Two days later he phoned the anxious mother from a safe house in Los Angeles. A member of her church congregation was dispatched in a church-owned station wagon to pick up the young men and pay the coyote the balance owed.

The following Sunday, Socorro rose at church to testify about God's goodness and to thank the congregation for their support. (The guardian angel is now an Apostolic pastor in Michoacan.)

Illegal aliens are much maligned in California these days. But there are Latino Pentecostal churches in this state — socially conservative, apolitical, long excluded from the public discourse — that have opted to "love the stranger." In doing so, they put otherwise law-abiding communities in contravention with the law. But they do so remembering their common history with the sojourners and remembering also that the law — like the Sabbath — is made for men and women, not the other way around.

Latino evangelical churches — two-thirds of them Pentecostal — recognize only one document for accepting otherwise undocumented strangers: a "*carta de recomendación*" — a letter from the sending pastor, written on his church's official letterhead, affirming that the newcomer is a person of good standing in the church. At a set point in a service, the receiving pastor will ask the newcomer to stand while the letter is read aloud. "I beg you to accept my recommendee as is the custom among us ... Assist him/her with any counsel or orientation that may be necessary." Quoting from the Book of Hebrews, the letter exhorts the congregation: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby

some have entertained angels unawares."

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This simple ritual transforms the letter into a credential of legitimacy and the newcomer into a full-fledged member of the congregation. It reflects the unique relationship between the Apostolic Assembly, a Latino Pentecostal denomination founded in 1916, and its sister church in Mexico, the Iglesia Apostòlica, an alliance codified by decades-old treaties and a joint constitution allowing for the cross-border exchange of members and personnel.

Combined, the two churches represent some half a million people. But their ritual for welcoming the stranger is now used widely by Latino evangelical churches throughout the Southwest and West. These religious communities view residents of the region as one people, united historically by blood, language, music, cuisine, faith. When secular law capriciously divides them, Biblical law takes precedence. While U.S. and Mexican immigration policies have fluctuated wildly over the past half century, the Latino evangelicals' ethos of brotherhood with and charity to the sojourner has remained constant.

Late one Friday afternoon last year, immigration agents raided a Central Valley carpentry shop and netted an Apostolic congregation's youth auxiliary president and his companion. Both were scheduled to preside over that evening's youth service. While their duties were hastily reassigned, a member of the Dorcas (Women's Auxiliary) prepared a plan to rescue the deported brethren. A car was dispatched to the U.S.-Mexico border. Discreet phone signals were arranged. Contact was made with the young deportees in Tijuana. Prayers were offered on their behalf.

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In short, an efficient church-run coyote operation restored the lost sheep to the congregation in time for the Sunday night evangelistic service, much to the brethren's joy. Perhaps it is foolish to think that the practices of a marginalized Latino Pentecostal church should inform American politics, let alone American private life. Still, as politicians preach communal values while accentuating the divisions in society, who is legitimate from who is not, these Latino Pentecostals bear witness to the true meaning of communal life.

Several months ago, Hermano Efren, a 52-year-old undocumented immigrant bereft of health and family from 30 years of drinking, died after his bike was struck by a speeding car. Ten months earlier, he had joined an Apostolic congregation and discovered a new purpose and a new family. His sudden death took his church by surprise.

Calls to the Mexican consulate and the California Highway Patrol turned up nothing; he was a man without a country. An unsent letter found in his meager belongings, however, yielded the address of an aged aunt in Guadalajara who had given him up for dead many years before. Anticipating her relay of power of attorney, the congregation assumed legal and financial responsibility for recovering and burying the body. As the casket was lowered into the cemetery plot to the words of the hymn, "*Mas Allá del Sol*" (Beyond the Sun) several women in the congregation wept. ■