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From Stranger to Friend: The Impact of a Welcome

How is it that racism can blind us from seeing immigrants as our brothers and sisters, and how can I see Christ in them? I am part of a minority race in America who arrived to this country and was welcomed by an adoptive family who introduced me to their community. Not knowing English and being new to American culture was a big transition. I cannot imagine what it would be like for others coming to this country, especially those who speak little or no English without the help and support of a welcoming community.

My Catholic faith has much to say about reaching out to the stranger. On the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, Pope Francis stated that it is normal to be afraid of the unknown, and yet we should imagine what it is like to be an immigrant in a new land. The Pope said, “Every stranger who knocks on our door is an opportunity to meet Jesus Christ who identifies himself with the foreigner who has been accepted or rejected in every age” (cf. Matthew 25:35-43). Pope Francis invites us “to overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or her.” The love of Christ moves us beyond the fear that differences create. In a stranger, we see a child of God who needs our hospitality, friendship, and respect.

At my high school, there are many learning opportunities to deepen our knowledge about social justice and racism. Recently, we heard a speaker talk about his experience as a child refugee in Tanzania. Listening to his struggles and dreams allowed us to put ourselves “in the

shoes of an immigrant,” as Pope Francis has exhorted us to do. When we hear the stories of those who are newcomers and different from us, we grow in our desire to be a community where they experience respect, dignity, and friendship. Saint Paul taught that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Our school community can strive to live and share the loving kindness of Christ with all.

The changing demographics of my parish community has brought new immigrants to our community, where I can also show a face of welcome. The presence of newcomers reminds us that Christ comes in the stranger and we can extend hospitality to these new members of our local church. My family has reached out to newcomers of different races at our parish by inviting them into our lives and we have discovered a beautiful gift of friendship for which we thank God. Every smile, every word of kindness, and every hand reached out in welcome helps make strangers into friends.