

Stand with migrants, refugees Sunday



Bishop Michael Pham of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego speaks at a demonstration in downtown San Diego on April 1. U-T

BY MICHAEL PHAM

Growing up during the Vietnam War was a difficult time for me. I remember being only 7 or 8 years old, hearing bombs explode in the distance and experiencing tear gas on several occasions. Even though I was not living directly in the war zone, those moments were frightening and unforgettable.

On April 30, 1975, the war between North and South Vietnam ended, and the country was unified under communist rule. Life became harsh and filled with uncertainty under the new government.

Food was scarce, and survival was a daily struggle. My father's and mother's greatest hope for me and my siblings was that we find ways to survive — and for us, that was to escape the oppressive regime.

In mid-1980, my parents took the risk of putting my sister, younger brother and me on a small boat with 116 others, seeking freedom. For three days and four nights, we drifted at sea without food or water.

We were chased by government forces, caught by pirates, and yet — by God's grace — rescued by an oil tanker that brought us to Malaysia and into a refugee camp. And with kindness and compassion, the United States welcomed us.

I remain profoundly grateful to this nation of immigrants for the chance to begin anew. America gave me freedom, education and opportunity. Education, in particular, was not just about gaining knowledge — it transformed my life. It gave me confidence, helped me build a career and led me to my calling.

Today, I stand as a leader in the Catholic Church because of the opportunities this country provided. I know that I am, in some small way, a sign of hope for others. When people are given opportunity, many will rise to it and make the very best of it.

I believe that most refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers — whether documented or undocumented — come to the United States with the same hope: to seek freedom, to contribute and to live better lives. Most strive to do good.

And yet it is troubling to see how our country treats immigrants today. When I see raids and deportations on television, I am reminded of my childhood in Vietnam, when people were taken away without explanation.

Because of what I saw then, I feel moved now by the Holy Spirit — to be a voice through my leadership, to speak for the vulnerable and to stand with them in their struggles.

As a faith leader in San Diego, I am inviting all people of faith to come together to proclaim and celebrate the dignity of immigrants.

This coming Sunday, Sept. 27, which Pope Leo has declared World Day of Migrants and Refugees, at 2 p.m. in Balboa Park, we will gather as people of all faiths behind the banner that reads, "All are Sacred," to remind ourselves of the sanctity of all people, especially immigrants and refugees. It is my hope that we will be 20,000 strong, as we gather, pray and hold a religious procession.

We must never forget that every person is made in the image and likeness of God. We are one human family, and we are called to treat each other with dignity and respect.

Indeed, each and every person on this Earth is sacred. I understand the need for our country to have and protect its borders. Of course! However, I fear we as a country are losing our identity as that place of freedom and opportunity that we have long been known for.

Presence is a form of advocacy. Our presence on Sunday, our solidarity and advocacy for the vulnerable migrant community are not optional acts of charity — they are the living expression of faith.

When we stand with those who are being detained, deported, displaced, we declare that love knows no borders and that every human being bears the image of God. At a deep core level in my heart — and perhaps in yours — there is a need to speak up, to say something is awry, to stand up and proclaim the truth, that all are sacred.

Pham is the bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego.