Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



Students show their drawings that highlight the immigrant student Itrat's journey from Pakistan to the U.S. Itrat's story is in the documentary "I Learn America." (Jennifer Wilson)



by Jennifer Wilson

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> "*Sister, what happens if a mother is deported, and her kid was born here in the United States?*"
>
> "*Why can't a child who was brought to the U.S. and now is 18 stay in the United States legally forever?*"
>
> "*Can an undocumented person who is 18 and came here as a child without papers go to college with financial aid?*"

These questions and more came from my students as they worked on a project after watching the documentary, "I Learn America." This documentary focused on five students who were in high school in New York City. They were from different countries with different circumstances regarding their legal status in the United States.

My classes watched the documentary and then further studied the different circumstances each experienced as part of our unit on immigration. They learned the differences between asylum-seekers and refugees. They learned about how dangerous the journey can be from Guatemala to the United States. Information that seemed like just facts to them at the beginning of the unit began to become more integrated as they began to feel like they knew the stories and possible circumstances of the students in the documentary.

I started to see them integrating the information and wondering out loud about the fairness of it. They began to connect what they had been learning to the principles of Catholic social teaching. Some of the students began to ask about the Catholic social teaching on life and dignity of the human person. They wanted to know why if we believe every person should live their life in dignity, then why would they have to go back to countries with unsafe conditions and extreme poverty? Why would they not be able to stay here and live their life as they had been doing since they arrived here in the U.S.? My students are young and have not thought much about the complexities of life, politics and other people's opinions. But studying theology gives the space to start to think about these questions.

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The days of teaching this unit go by and one day — just minutes before the bell rings — two questions were asked, and I was glad I had until the next class to think about them! I write the questions on the board:

> "*If God loves everyone, why does it seem that God's love is not equal?*"
>
> "*Why do I have so much in the U.S. and those students we learned about did not have the same opportunities in their countries?*"

The questions were not surprising. However, I did wonder how I was going to answer them. High school students often fixate on the question of fairness.

The next day the students walked into class, and I was ready with two questions of my own. I had them write down on small pieces of paper, the different ways they have felt God's love. Those were put in one pile. Then I had them write on another piece of paper, ways that the five students they learned about might have felt God's love. Those answers went in another pile.

I read their answers out loud and they had written things like: "*I see God when my grandma smiles at me*," "*when my team wins*," "*when I see a butterfly,*" and "*when I spend time with my family.*"

These students have had me as a teacher before, and I am always asking them where they saw God. They have grown in their responses. I often ask them to look for the *feelings,* and that they will probably find God there. On this day I said that again, and someone rolled their eyes and said they were "not in the mood to look for the feelings."

I responded to the "snarkiness" by saying, "Well, God is always there whether you are in the mood or not." We then looked at their answers in light of how the students they have learned about might have felt God's presence in their lives. Their answers were like these:

> "*He saw God when he made it through the desert.*"
>
> "*She felt God when she saw her dad for the first time in a long time.*"
>
> "*She might have felt God when she felt welcome at school.*"

We compared the answers and we talked about how God loves all of us, all the time, regardless of the fairness of life. The atrocities of systems that do not give people the fullness of life they deserve are hard lessons for my students to understand. However, if they have not already suffered hardships in their lives they will soon enough.

None of us can explain why systems fail people or why we experience tragedy. All of us can ask ourselves the question: Where is God amid the sadness and darkness that can come into our lives? If and when we look for God in our feelings — as I ask my students to do — we might be surprised at where God has been.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education** feature series. View the full series.