



Florida Bishops Statement on Immigration

January 1, 2011

“When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord am your God.”

Leviticus 19: 33 – 34

We, the Catholic bishops of Florida, are deeply concerned with our nation’s flawed immigration system and its impact on the human dignity and lives of our migrant brothers and sisters. This system divides families and causes human suffering to those who search for work in support of their families.

In Florida, our economy is dependent upon manual labor for agriculture, construction and the service industry. Limited numbers of worker visas are available to bring unskilled labor into the U.S. for jobs but too often, demand exceeds need. This has created a market for undocumented workers who may face abuses such as inadequate wages, substandard housing and no benefits with a real threat of exploitation by unscrupulous employers, human smugglers and human traffickers. While the Catholic Church does not advocate for undocumented immigration into the United States, it respects the dignity of the human person and the right to work to meet the basic needs of their families.

The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2241)

The failure of the United States Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform leaves migrants in search of work without legal protection and vulnerable to mistreatment. At the same time, our State and nation benefits from their work and their taxes, creating a permanent underclass with no rights in our society. In his 1981 encyclical letter, *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II expressed that care should be taken to prevent the exploitation of those who must emigrate in order to find work. Furthermore, just legislation must ensure the same criteria apply to immigrant workers as other workers in society. As a moral matter, we cannot accept the toil and taxes of these human beings without offering them the protections of our laws. This is not the American way.

We also have grave concerns about the impact of this flawed system on family unity. Families are the building blocks for society and the place where children are nourished and protected. Too often, backlogs and visa quotas for countries prevent immigrant citizens and legal permanent residents from bringing spouses, parents and minor children from overseas, a wait for some approaching 20 years. The U.S. citizen children of undocumented immigrants are at significant risk if parents are incarcerated and scheduled for deportation.

Our humanitarian concerns with the broken immigration system do not conflict with, but complement the right of the sovereign nation to control its borders. By repairing the system comprehensively, and providing legal means for entry, the nation would replace illegality with legality so that individuals and families could migrate and work in a safe and controlled manner. This would not only protect the rights of the migrant, but also help ensure national security, as law enforcement would be able to focus on those who come to our country to harm us.

The Church recognizes the right of a sovereign state to control its borders in furtherance of the common good. It also recognizes the right of persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given rights. These teachings complement each other. While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. (Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, a joint pastoral statement composed by the Bishops of Mexico and the United States.)

While we support the right of the sovereign nation to control its borders, this does not mean that it should be done in a manner that undermines basic human rights. The vast majority of immigrants to this nation are not criminals, which should be taken into account in any enforcement strategy. The recent increases in deportation and the sometimes inhumane treatment of detainees such as refusal to allow contact with families and no legal representation causes us to question the methods used against those already in fear for their lives. Immigration law is complicated and only trained professionals have current knowledge of the laws, not local law enforcement.

Any passing of laws that give legal sanction to profiling people will decrease public safety and discourage reporting of crime. The so-called 'illegals' are so, not because they wish to defy the law, but because the law does not provide them with any channels to regularize their status in our country which needs their labor. They are not so much breaking the law, as being broken by the law.

Instead of passing local and state laws which cause fear in immigrant communities, Congress must bring these persons out of the shadows so they can fully contribute their talents to our nation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has consistently advocated for "a path to citizenship" meaning those who are already present and contributing to society could come forward and pay a fine, undergo a comprehensive criminal background check, show they have paid taxes, are learning English and obtain a visa that would lead to permanent residency. Immigration is a federal issue and there must be a federal solution rather than the attempts to craft varying proposals in several states including Florida.

We call upon our federal delegation to lead the fight for comprehensive immigration reform in Congress. We call upon the Florida legislature to resist efforts to demonize those who provide the labor for our economy and a living for their families. Our Catholic Social Teaching and the tradition of the Church affirm the dignity of every human being, made in the image of God.

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