

Interfaith Prayer Vigil for Immigration Reform
Friday, February 26, 2010
Saint Julie Billiard Church

Good evening! I want to thank the community of St. Julie Billiard for its kind hospitality in hosting this important prayer vigil for immigration reform and I extend my thanks to all the organizers and leaders who put this vigil together: the PACT groups from Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, St. Patrick's Parish and here at St. Julie Billiard. The work you are doing is of the deepest importance in our pastoral life as a Church. I also acknowledge the presence of so many of the priests of the diocese of San Jose as well as the many clergy and representatives from other faith traditions. It is a powerful sign of unity when all of us are gathered together with a singular focus: to pray for comprehensive immigration reform and to recommit ourselves to continue to be engaged in this work.

Last December 12, I signed one of these postcards at the prayer vigil at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. I realized then as I realize now, how important this issue of immigration is – not only to our immigrant sisters and brothers, but to all of us. We are indeed *one family under God*. Over the past few weeks I have taken special care to listen to the stories of how the current immigration system is affecting the lives of the people within this diocese – the County of Santa Clara. I met with individuals as well as small groups hearing testimonies and stories of struggle. I heard the story of a young student who – every day – wakes up with the anxiety that she may not see her mother or father again. Pain and fear are a part of her daily existence. Another story is of a single mother struggling to raise teenage children and work full time. There are many other testimonies filled with struggle and

hope. As I heard testimony after testimony, I thought to myself, what can *I* do? As the bishop of the diocese, I can listen, but is that enough? I can encourage my priests to speak to this issue and I can even appear here, but is that enough? What more can *I do*? It occurred to me: Maybe “What can *I* do” is the wrong question. A better question is, “What can *we* do?”

The motto from my coat of arms is, “Together in Christ.” This motto in the context of tonight’s vigil, suggests that the solution to our current crisis is not found in the hands of immigrants alone, nor in the hands of elected officials in Washington. No, the solution belongs to all of us: the community. One of the founding tenants of our faith tradition is that God calls us together in a bond of unity in Christ. This unity is forged by the grace of Christ, who binds us to himself *and to one another*. We are our brother and sister’s keeper and because we are each other’s keeper, injustice suffered by one is an injustice suffered by all. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

We are affected by the 12 million people and all their family members who face the awful specter of the possibility of separation because of deportations which take place every day. These people are not strangers. We know their stories, we’ve seen their faces. We know their names. They are with us tonight.

We are affected by the hundreds of labor violations that occur everyday throughout this country. Only a handful of violations are ever officially

reported. Together we must right the wrongs and the abuses and the exploitation suffered by millions of immigrant workers. When we address these very complex issues, we will meet resistance and in some cases outright hostility. We must return hatred and hostility with love and apathy and disinterest with enthusiasm.

When we as a faith community move on this issue – and let's be realistic here – any change will not come quickly. Take a lesson from history. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's took years and years to get off the ground and the results of that struggle took over 2 decades to be fully realized. During the 1960's, so called "sensible" politicians cautioned faith leaders who supported the civil rights movement to take it slow or to simply back off. Why? Because – as they said then, "people aren't ready for change." Thank God we had men and women of faith who were unmoved by water canons and guard dogs. Faith helped them back then, to stand firm against the violent brutality of an unjust system. The resolve of many faith leaders of that era was attributed to their conviction that God would help them overcome all adversity. Faith sustained people throughout those long nights of injustice. At first, there were many defeats and only a few victories. Over time, the number of victories became greater than the losses.

No one lost faith when public officials failed to act. No one lost faith when people were jailed or beaten back by angry mobs. Because faith leaders kept the light of hope burning bright in times of loss, victories began to roll in. Eventually, segregated water fountains and swimming pools gave way to a more integrated society. In time the schools and neighborhoods improved. The Civil Rights era has taught us that the work of justice is a long-term

commitment driven by a faith-filled vision of a just society, a peace-filled kingdom.

The injustices that immigrants face today are in many ways different from those who suffered under the harsh Jim Crow laws of the South. The injustices that immigrants suffer are; however, quite painful as you have heard. The current system results in families being torn apart and lives being lost each day in the desert and in the ocean. The status quo results in wage exploitation and the abuse of workers. There are countless injustices suffered and, as people of faith, we must be ready to walk hand in hand with one another: immigrant and non-immigrant, and build upon the advances of the Civil Rights Era and continue the vision of equality and peace for all people. May God grant success at the work of our hands. (Psalm 90:17)