

For Goodness Sake: Why America Needs Immigration Reform

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Thank you, Chancellor Thorp. My dear friends, I am very pleased to be with you this evening. This is my first visit to North Carolina, and, of course, where else would I be but in “Chapel Hill,” at this great university. Those of us out West who always followed UCLA basketball, also kept a wary eye on the Tar Heels. We had never heard of the Blue Devils. In fact, I’m still not sure who they are and why they are blue and not red. But I do remember the Tar Heels!

Thanks also to all of tonight’s sponsors for making it possible for to me to speak with you about an issue that is very close to my heart, and which I have been delighted to discover is a topic of great academic interest and research at the University of North Carolina. I commend all of you for your continued work in the area of immigration and its implications for our nation.

I also wish to thank my friend and brother bishop, Bishop Michael Burbidge, the Bishop of the Diocese of Raleigh, for encouraging my visit and talk this evening. Bishop Burbidge, I wish to note, is a member of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration, which sets policies and direction for the U.S. Catholic Church’s work in the area of immigration.

Americans are great storytellers. Since before the founding of our Republic, Americans have used storytelling to teach younger generations about the principles and values that we hold dear, as well as to highlight that which defines us as people living in a free society. These

anecdotes usually tell us something of our history, our present identity and our responsibility to help shape the future of our country.

I would like to begin, then, by telling three short stories:

- In August 2008, a young woman and her three young children aged 14, 10 and 6, were driving from their home in Western North Carolina to visit their father, who was working in Maryland. At 2 a.m., they were stopped by a sheriff's deputy on Interstate 85. The officer arrested the woman, an undocumented immigrant from Honduras, for driving without a license. The children were left on the side of the road as the police car drove off with their mother. The children spent the next nine hours hiding in the bushes alongside the highway—scared, exhausted and distraught—until their father arrived from Maryland to rescue them.
- Last fall, a teacher in one of our inner city Catholic schools in Los Angeles asked her first grade students to bring in pictures of loved ones who had died. The pictures were to be placed on a small altar during the annual Day of the Dead commemoration, which is a popular celebration in the Latino community. The next day, twin boys in the class brought in a picture of their father. The teacher, who knew the family, called their mother. "Isn't your husband alive?" Yes, of course, she replied, but he was deported a few months ago.
- One day, "many years ago," a ten-year-old boy was working alongside five men of Mexican descent in the poultry processing business owned by the boy's father in North Hollywood, California, when the plant was raided by the Border Patrol. The officers came running in with guns drawn. It was an extremely terrifying and intimidating moment for those employees, all of whom had papers. As for the boy, a much younger

Roger Mahony, I will never forget the terror that those men with their guns created in the workplace that day.

My friends, these are American stories, too. How do they fit into the American Narrative? What American values do they support or offend? And what is our response as contemporary Americans? Do these stories reflect who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to be remembered by future generations? Is this who we are at our best? In a word, “No.”

To be sure, the immigration debate presents us with a complex array of economic, legal and social issues. And while I will briefly touch on some of these areas tonight, my main appeal for reforming our current immigration laws is that it is simply the right thing to do morally. Millions of individuals and families are regularly exploited, demeaned and dehumanized as a direct result of our broken immigration system. Ultimately, therefore, immigration is a moral issue because it impacts human rights, human dignity and the human life of the person. How we address it speaks directly to our moral character as a free people, as Americans.

I speak to you this evening as one whose perspective is shaped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and as a citizen who participates in our democracy. My views are based on Judeo-Christian principles, which are also the basis for American civil jurisprudence. It is my hope that you will be able to draw connections from my views, and those of the Catholic Church, to the legal framework which governs our society, most particularly those that govern immigration.

There are many who say that undocumented immigrants are hurting our economy. I believe there is an abundance of economic data to refute this claim. But first, what do we mean by the word “economy”? My view on the economy is not shaped primarily by the common understanding of this term. “Economy” has its roots in the Greek *oikonomia* which, in the first instance, means the arrangement of a household. Here the principal focus is not monetary.

Oikonomia suggests care for how a household is ordered or administered according to a plan. In early Christian history, *oikonomia* referred to the way in which God's household is ordered or administered.

God's household, God's grand economy, is one in which holiness and truth, justice and love, and above all, peace (*eirene* or *shalom*) prevail. In my view, what makes for a good economy is the full flourishing of everyone who is part of God's economy, household or community. The question is: who belongs in the household? Is God's good household roomy enough for all?

The wisdom of the Scriptures suggest that hope is a powerful push toward a new future in which there is room enough for all in God's household. The beginning of God's people on earth involved God moving Abraham across ancient borders: "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you..." (Genesis 12:1)

The formation of the ancient land of Israel, similarly, involved the command to cross ancient borders out of a land of despair and slavery, to live out a new hope in a new land, as Joshua was told and, finally, to go to a new land of rest across the River Jordan (Joshua 22:4). So powerful is this theme of new hope that in our history, the rich legacy of African-American Gospel and Spirituals time and again refers to crossing the Jordan as the sign of hope, an escape from despair. So, movement to places of hope is woven into the very fabric of the Biblical story, continuing even today as we look around us.

Of course, we also know from history that misery and despair are also powerful forces on human movement throughout the world. Because of war, famine, and despair, ancient peoples

sought refuge in lands where life was possible: “So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land” Genesis 12:10.

Americans, of course, understand this pull of hope and the push of despair. We hear it every time we contemplate the powerful words of Emma Lazarus, now engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Here are the words that continue to speak to a nation built by those who despair, enflamed by hope, drove them to cross borders and seek new beginnings: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”

It is precisely because of their own origins in a people who moved in hope to leave behind despair, that the Scriptures teach us to have an unrelenting compassion for those who, even in a depressed world economy, seek new hope in their lives. The ethical injunctions of Moses remind us again and again, in Deuteronomy, in Exodus, and in Leviticus:

“You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”
(Deuteronomy 10:19)

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21)

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:33-34)

“You shall not deprive a resident alien of justice...” (Deuteronomy 24:17)

This wise and urgent teaching to care for the stranger and alien who responds to hope and despair is emphasized just as powerfully in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who directly teaches his followers to treat the stranger and welcome them as if we welcome Jesus Himself

among us: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” (Matthew 25:35)

Finally, the head of the Jerusalem Church, the Apostle James, sternly warns us never to take advantage of those who work among us as guests, or their despair will reach the ear of God just as the cries of Hebrew slaves under Egypt once did: “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” (James 5:4)

As a Christian, there are no prior commitments that can overrule, or trump, this biblical tradition of compassion for the stranger, the alien, and the worker. Whatever economic, political or social policies we discuss—and whatever discussion of constitutional rights and liberties—we cannot turn our backs to this biblical legacy of hope.

So, the legacy of the *oikonomia*, economics in its most basic sense, is to be concerned, in Jesus’ own words, with a “household of many dwelling places” (John 14:2) – welcoming, ordered, with room enough for hope. This hope provides the underpinnings of the position of the Catholic Church on immigration reform legislation.

This Scriptural and theological basis can be applied to the ongoing debate on immigration in our country, even in what are difficult economic times.

To date, the debate has hinged upon two questions: whether illegal immigration hurts us in the economic area and whether those here outside the law, as well as their families, should be allowed to remain or be deported.

First, do undocumented immigrants help our economy grow or do they use and misuse our economic resources? The premise of the question is whether, in terms of pure monetary measurement, these individuals and their families are a benefit to our country. I would submit,

based on this narrow premise, that these immigrants fill important jobs and contribute overall to our national economy.

If one takes into account the roots of the word *oikonomia*—the order of God’s household—as well as the scriptural themes of hospitality and welcoming I have outlined, the premise of the question changes to whether the worker and their families themselves receive the benefits of their labor. In Catholic thought, the human person should not serve the economy, but the economy should serve the human person, so that each person and his or her family can live in dignity and without want and can move, if needed, to find the place of hope. Our laws should be configured to ensure that even the low-skilled laborer, who sits at the bottom of the economic ladder, reaps the fruits of their labor in dignity and with full rights in the society.

The current reality in our nation, however, is that we accept their labor, their separation from family, their taxes, and their purchasing power, yet we do not offer the undocumented population the protection of our laws. While such a system might meet our economic needs in the narrow measurement of monetary gain, it fails to meet the broad definition of *oikonomia* or the call of Scripture. It contributes to a disordered household without hope and without compassion, as we witness in immigrant neighborhoods throughout the nation, and increasingly here, too, in North Carolina.

Thus, to restore order to God’s household, we must ensure that all are welcome to the table. This means that we need to reform our immigration system in order to provide legal protection for those who live on the margins of our economy and are not invited to share in the banquet: the undocumented and future migrants who come to our nation, to work, to join family, or to support family at home.

Once it is agreed that all should share in the feast that is the fruit of their hands, the question becomes whether those who reside outside the law have the same claim to a seat at the table as those who are not outside of it. Given the current broken immigration system, the Catholic Church says, “Yes!” Let me explain.

Many persons who in good faith oppose comprehensive immigration reform argue that the “rule of law” should be honored and that anyone who breaks the law should not be given its protection. Church leaders would agree that we are a nation built on a system of laws and that a sovereign nation has the right to protect its borders. But the term “rule of law” refers to how we are governed, and suggests that no one, not even our leaders, are free from honoring the law.

But there are other elements of democracy we must consider before rendering judgment on the undocumented immigrant. First, while we may be governed by laws, these laws are created and administered in the pursuit of justice. Any law that does not serve justice violates basic human dignity and human rights. Our constitution was written by the founding fathers to prevent unjust laws imposed by a malevolent monarch.

In the view of Catholic Church leadership, and many others, our current immigration laws are, in a word, unjust. We gladly accept the toil and taxes of the immigrant work force to fill our economic needs, but look the other way when they are exploited in the workplace, die in the desert, or are arrested and deported for the most minor of civil violations, like jay-walking. When convenient politically, we scapegoat the immigrant without acknowledging our complicity. Our immigration laws perpetuate this reality. Of the nearly one-half million immigrants who enter unauthorized into the United States each year (or overstay their visas) nearly 90 percent obtain jobs within six months, but there are only 5,000 immigrant visas

available. This is a disordered system, hardly the arrangement of a household according to a plan where there is room enough for all at the table.

Our Constitution was written to ensure that justice is achieved in our land and that all receive due process under the law. In our democratic system we can change unjust laws, and, I would add, are obligated to do so. In the area of immigration, the Catholic Church leadership argues that our country has a moral obligation to change the law because it violates the order of God's household and undermines human dignity.

Our immigration system is an immoral system that thrives upon the weakness and suffering of those without a voice. From the Catholic perspective, the ultimate question in the immigration debate is whether we want to live in a society that accepts the toil of undocumented workers with one hand and then treats them like criminals with the other. I have reason to believe that the answer is "No."

Though the movement for immigration reform has suffered setbacks, most recently the failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act, a review of major national polls since 2007 indicates plenty of reason for optimism: a majority of people polled believe our borders need to be made more secure, and that illegal immigration needs to be controlled. But the same polls reveal that a majority of people polled [63% in one poll, 81% in another] are open to a structured path to earned citizenship for those who are here in our country without papers but who pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs.

These high percentages tell me that Gospel values and the American spirit are still alive among us. I suspect that many anti-immigrant feelings and sentiments arise from frustration with the seeming inability, or the unwillingness, to fix our broken immigration system.

And this brings me back to storytelling. It seems to me that one way to avoid being side-tracked by the heated rhetoric and political posturing that misinforms the immigration debate, is for each of us to listen to the stories of immigrants themselves. I have found that the more we come to know immigrants as individual people like ourselves with the same longings and yearning for themselves, their families and their futures, the more we will understand the need to reform immigration laws to help bring these 11 million people along a path to legal recognition.

Immigrants are our neighbors, co-workers, students, and friends—and they contribute greatly to our nation and to our communities. This is true in California, and also in North Carolina, which, as some of you may know, has the largest population of undocumented persons in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

I invite all of us to open our minds and hearts to hear the actual stories of the immigrants themselves. Who are they? Why are they here? How is our current immigration system failing them? How do their experiences impact our local communities and our nation?

I have begun a series of personal conversations with our immigrant brothers and sisters in and around Southern California. I have asked them to share their stories about how their lives have been impacted by having to live in the shadows of society because of an antiquated and broken immigration system.

These stories are representative of the experiences of the majority of undocumented immigrants living in our country today. **And their stories are our stories, American stories.**

You may view some of these stories on a website called www.facesofimmigrants.org I would like to close with one of those real stories now, and I look forward to our own conversation in a few minutes.

Thank You and May God Bless You.