

Immigration Reform and the Catholic Church
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May 1, 2006

Cardinal Roger Mahony electrified the US immigration reform debate by announcing on March 1, 2006 (Ash Wednesday), that he would instruct archdiocesan priests and lay Catholics to ignore provisions in a House-passed “enforcement only” bill (H.R. 4437) — were they to pass — that would make it a crime to assist unauthorized immigrants.

Since then, the Catholic Church has played a central role in the immigrant-led protests that have swept the country. The church has encouraged parishioners to participate in the protests, offered bishops and priests as speakers, and served as an interlocutor for its newcomer members before Congress and in other public forums.

The Catholic Church occupies the center of the US debate on immigration, and not by accident. In February 2003, a time when the attacks of September 11 had pushed immigration off the national agenda, bishops in the United States and Mexico released *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*, a pastoral statement that called for a comprehensive approach to immigration reform.

Strangers No Longer built on themes established in other pastoral statements by US bishops (*One Family Under God* in 1995 and *Unity in Diversity* in 2000), annual statements by the Holy Father on migration, and a long history of Catholic teaching documents. The US bishops have conducted extensive rollout of these documents through public gatherings, within the relevant church structures, and to lay Catholics, in response to what it sees as increasingly harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation.

In May 2005, US bishops kicked off a national campaign, “Justice for Immigrants, A Journey of Hope” (JFI). The campaign supports increasing development in immigrant-sending countries; allowing necessary, unauthorized workers to earn the right to remain (permanently) through their labor, good moral character, and payment of a fine (a proportional punishment); and expanding avenues for employment- and family-based immigration.

So far, nearly 80 dioceses have initiated local JFI campaigns to educate Catholics and the public on migration issues and to engage

policymakers on the local, state, and national levels. These campaigns attempt to reach directly into parishes — the most basic unit of the Catholic Church where believers gather at least weekly — and, in many cases, have fed directly into local rallies.

In addition, dozens of bishops, national Catholic agencies, and religious communities have mobilized their communities in support of the JFI campaign through pro-immigrant statements. The JFI campaign has been explicitly linked to the Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty which — through overseas development programs and advocacy on foreign aid, trade, and debt relief — seeks to alleviate the conditions that force many people to migrate.

The Catholic Church and Immigration

Why does the Catholic Church care so much about US immigration reform? The explanation lies in the church's view of itself as a pilgrim people in a pilgrim church. It sees the Holy Family — in their flight to Egypt — as the archetypal refugee family. Migrants evoke its own history, including the biblical exodus and exile, the itinerant ministry of Jesus, and its 2,000-year missionary tradition. The stranger is welcomed as a Gospel imperative.

In *Strangers No Longer*, the church states that people have the right not to migrate; that is, they should be able to live freely in their countries of birth. However, when this is impossible, whether due to extreme poverty or persecution, the church says they have a right to migrate, and nations have a duty to receive them.

Two fundamental strands of the church's mission — protecting the dignity of all and gathering into one God's scattered children — come together in its ministry to migrants and newcomers. In effect, the church teaches that all people are "brothers and sisters" and that immigration status does not change this fact. Likewise, it offers its Catholic Charities programs, legal offices, community organizing grants, and refugee resettlement services to all vulnerable migrants and newcomers, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Historical Perspective

As articulated in a recent Catholic Charities policy paper, the church sees parallels between the last great wave of immigrants to the United States, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the current wave:

Like immigrants now, newcomers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries came from different countries than their predecessors. Harsh, well-organized movements portrayed them as a threat to the nation's security, to law-abiding citizens and to US workers. Restrictionists accused Catholics of being unassimilable due to their faith, just as some vilify Muslim-Americans today. The vast wealth created by economic innovation coexisted with gross poverty. Newcomers suffered from low wages and dangerous working conditions. Many families split apart and dissolved. By 1920, 75 percent of US Catholics were immigrants, with recent newcomers primarily coming from Southern and Eastern Europe. In response to their needs, the church created or significantly expanded all of its defining institutions, including parishes, schools, charities, hospitals, mutual aid societies, religious communities, and fraternal and sororal groups. For these Catholics, the church tried to offer an array of educational, medical, social service, and social institutions that paralleled those of the larger society.

Although reliable statistics have not been collected on the number of foreign-born Catholics today, it has been estimated that in excess of 40 percent of newly arriving immigrants are Catholic.

While active in the immigration reform movement, the church has also struggled to adapt its core institutions to the needs of today's immigrant Catholics. As an example, Catholic Charities agencies represent the nation's largest charitable social service network. Based on the needs of newcomers, this network has rapidly transformed into both a social service and a legal network, with 159 agencies now providing legal services to low-income newcomers.

Since 1975, the US bishops' conference — through its Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) division — has resettled nearly 900,000 refugees in dioceses throughout the country. The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) supports a national network of Catholic Charities and diocesan legal programs that serve nearly 400,000 immigrants per year. These programs help low-wage newcomers secure work authorization, reunify with family members, become US citizens, and gain protection from persecution.

Both networks serve particularly vulnerable newcomers, such as torture survivors, detained immigrants, victims of human trafficking and, of course, the unauthorized. Beyond immigration-specific agencies like MRS and CLINIC, the church extends all of its development, social service, community organizing, and pastoral

ministries to migrants and newcomers.

Church Position on Migration Policy

The Catholic Church in the United States does not support open borders, illegal immigration, or an “amnesty” that would grant legal status to all unauthorized immigrants. It believes nations have a legitimate responsibility to promote the common good by denying admission to certain migrants and by regulating the flow of all those who are seeking to enter.

However, the church sees the current US immigration system — while generous in many respects — as badly in need of reform. It has been particularly offended by hundreds of deaths along the US-Mexico border; the growth of human smuggling rings; the disconnect between US labor needs, trade policies, and immigration admission levels; and decades-long delays in some family reunification categories.

The church does not believe that criminal prosecution and deportation of unauthorized immigrants offer a viable, much less a humane, approach to the problem. As the church is quick to highlight, many unauthorized immigrants live in “mixed-status” families and represent five percent of the US workforce.

Doing nothing, the church believes, would facilitate the growth of a population of second-class noncitizens with limited rights, few prospects, or security.

As the US bishops stated in 1986, the year the US Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), “It is against the common good and unacceptable to have a double society, one visible with rights and one invisible without rights — a voiceless underground of undocumented persons.” IRCA made it illegal for employers to hire unauthorized immigrants, increased enforcement, and granted amnesty to unauthorized immigrants who met certain criteria. After IRCA passed, the US bishops mobilized the country's largest network of “qualified designated entities” — voluntary and community organizations that had permission from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to help unauthorized immigrants fill out adjustment-of-status applications.

To fix the current system, US bishops support a comprehensive approach. They believe “enforcement only” will exacerbate the current crisis. As evidence, they cite an increase in border control funding

between 1993 and 2006 (from \$361 million to \$1.8 billion) that has been accompanied by roughly a tripling of the country's unauthorized population, from 3.9 to 12 million people.

Looking Ahead

As a result of its pro-immigrant stand on immigration reform, the church has been accused of betraying the United States, violating its tax-exempt status, and prospecting for new (immigrant) members. Above all, it has been criticized for inserting itself in a political issue on which some say it has little expertise and can make no particular contribution.

Yet many Catholics think the church's reverence for immigrants as human beings uniquely qualifies it to help the nation understand "what is just" for them. It believes a just immigration system would allow immigrants to realize their basic aspirations and, in doing so, would serve the good of all Americans.

The full membership of newcomers will not happen overnight, and it will not be accomplished solely by immigration reform legislation. Ultimately, the integration process requires not just political, social, and economic opportunity, but a sense of shared community and values. The church — through its JFI campaign and many ministries — plans to devote itself to this long-term goal, well after immigration reform legislation passes.

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