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Let goodwill drive the discussion

By Charles J. Chaput and Michael J. Sheridan

Two qualities shape the tone of today's national immigration discussion. The first is a legitimate concern for public safety, respect for the law and the financial health of our civil institutions and services. The second is a much darker alarmism that would cast many undocumented workers as potential deadbeats or terrorists.

Immigration is not a new issue for Americans. More than a century ago, Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants faced the same hostility many Latino immigrants face now. At a time when U.S. immigration policies and enforcement were far more lax than today, many of them were "illegal." Some of the same elected representatives now making our federal immigration laws may have had grandparents or great-grandparents whose status would get them deported in 2006.

Of course, times change. Change is difficult. The world today is a dangerous place. Over the past 15 years, Colorado and other states have seen a sharp increase in newcomers, many of them from Latin America. Coloradans have a right to protect the well-being of their communities. The General Assembly's special session, which begins today, will seek to address these and other issues. But especially in an election year, the debate must take place in a spirit of goodwill.

With so much political gain at stake, this will be a challenge. The special session offers a chance to have a serious, civil discourse on immigration in a manner that serves everyone - our citizens, the undocumented workers among us, and the families they support. But if the legislature gets into a contest over which political party can be tougher on "illegals," we'll undermine our own best interests and miss an opportunity to help frame the national immigration discussion with common sense and justice.

Catholics have no magic pen for drafting legislation. That isn't the role of the church. But Catholics and other people of faith do have a common set of principles that should inform all our thinking. Immigration reform is not merely a policy debate. It's a profoundly moral issue. The measure of a just society is how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members.

Scripture reminds us that "You shall treat the stranger who resides with you no differently from the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once strangers in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19:33- 34)

For Christians, the "common good" is a fundamental and permanent principle of our social teaching. When it comes to Colorado and its laws, the common good requires legislation that enables both employers and workers to earn an adequate living without deceit or fear.

We need to resist proposals that emphasize enforcement at the expense of real reform. Punishing criminals is justice. That's a good thing. But turning poor people who seek a dignified existence for their families into criminals in order to punish them is not justice. It's both foolish and wrong. We fully support security policies that target real threats to our peace. But that should not require that we push further into the shadows some of the very workers who are strengthening and building our country.

Illegal immigration is a serious matter, but it should never be a felony. Persons of goodwill - no matter what their faith - instinctively search for solutions that favor a spirit of solidarity.

Our common humanity transcends borders. It invites us to think and act in ways that are just, not punitive. That includes our lawmaking.

The people of Colorado have a deep sense of decency and fairness. This decency - even more than the vast natural beauty of our state - is what makes Colorado great.

We ask all Coloradans to call upon our elected officials to focus on immigration without the political maneuvering that so easily overshadows reality. The laws passed by this year's special session will have a direct effect on the treatment and dignity of the human beings among us who are immigrants. As citizens, we will be responsible for those laws.

If we let common sense and good policy drive out the ugly partisan politics that can infect special sessions, we'll have a beneficial debate. We need to promote dignity, not punishment. And real reform is more than just another word for "enforcement."

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