



The Journey of Hope: The *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign

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By

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The *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign was formally launched on May 10, 2005. You may recall that was the same week that Senators McCain and Kennedy introduced a comprehensive immigration reform bill. That piece of legislation was the first, and some think the best, to incorporate many of the reforms that the bishops are promoting and it gave us hope and encouragement that comprehensive immigration reform, based on humane principles, was possible.

Given the coincidence of the timing of these two events (the launching of the Campaign and the introduction of the McCain-Kennedy bill), one can be forgiven for thinking that the *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign is all about achieving reforms in our nation's immigration laws. In fact, the JFI Campaign was designed to accomplish much more than that. Now, to be sure, the Campaign has been very active in legislative advocacy and intends to continue to influence public attitudes and public policies. But, in my view, fundamentally, the Campaign is an attempt by the Church to relearn what it means to be an immigrant Church.

When the earliest Catholics arrived to this country, they faced discrimination and hardship, much like today's immigrants. One hundred and fifty years ago, in the midst of the "first great wave" of immigrants, there was the Know Nothing Party, which opposed immigration and Catholics. Today, look around...we again have a presidential candidate running on an immigration restrictionist platform.

For those earlier immigrants, the Church was the place one could find solace; it was a place to feel safe. The Church was the voice for those earlier immigrants. The Church provided the welcome, helped educate the children, and tended to the sick and elderly among the immigrants. It is an interesting fact that the first national office the bishops created was the Office of Immigration. Among other things, that office represented the bishops' in advocating for federal laws to protect immigrants.

Today's Catholics, though the vast majority are descendants of those earlier immigrants, no longer relate to the immigrant experience. I dare say that many Catholics in this country today are hostile toward immigrants, especially the so-called "illegals."

Father Bryan Hehir, one of the great thinkers within the Church today, has suggested that this phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that when Catholics began arriving in this country, they inhabited the fringes of U.S. society. Being a group on the margins, those earlier Catholics exhibited solidarity. Most of today's Catholics, though, represent the center of society. They hold positions of power and wealth. Thus, they no longer have empathy with today's immigrants.

At the height of the 1st great wave of immigration, in 1920, 3 out of every 4 Catholics was an immigrant. Today, 2 out 5 are immigrants, but that proportion is rising, because some 300,000 Catholics come into this country each year.

So, how do we relearn what it means to be an immigrant Church? I believe this is the question that should be at the forefront of our deliberations during our gathering this week. This is at the heart of what this Campaign is all about.

Since some in the audience were not involved in the Campaign when it was launched in 2005, I want to give a very brief history of how the Campaign came to be and what it was designed to achieve. I hope this will also serve as an appropriate context for our time together these next few days.

I'd then like to give you my perception of the state of the Campaign today. How are we doing and what has been achieved?

I'll end with some food-for-thought as we go forward.

Mexico-U.S. Bishops' Collaboration

It is said that change is slow within the Church. I don't dispute this, but having witnessed the evolution of the Church's response to contemporary immigration problems in this country, I can say that the slowness of change is sometimes the result of building a solid foundation from which to really make a sustainable difference.

It was early 1999, eight years ago, that the bishops on the USCCB Migration Committee began a dialogue with their counterparts in Mexico about the state of migration in the region and how the Church and our nations' public policies needed to respond. This, by

the way, coincided with the issuance of a major pastoral letter by the U.S. bishops called, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*. If you are familiar with that letter, you know that the bishops acknowledged that the Church in this country has not always been a welcoming presence in the lives of newcomers and the bishops committed themselves to transforming the Church to better reflect Christian values toward immigrants.

The dialogue between the Mexican and U.S. bishops led to some pretty intensive investigations/studies and discernment by the bishops. They met with migrants to learn why they were migrating and what their experiences were; they met with government officials responsible for making and implementing immigration laws; they met with social and legal service and pastoral care providers to learn of their challenges in meeting the needs of migrants; they met with academics; and they met with folks in the community who represented many perspectives on the question of migration.

What came out of this process was a recognition on the part of the bishops of three fundamental truths that have guided them since: (1) the Church needs to be a more welcoming presence in the lives of migrants, accompanying them on their journey and welcoming them in receiving communities, (2) until or unless the root causes of migration are addressed, desperate people will be compelled out of necessity to seek a life elsewhere, and (3) the U.S. immigration system is in desperate need of reform; that it is simply too outdated and inadequate to meet present realities.

Issuance of the Pastoral Letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*.

The bishops of Mexico and the United States, in their role as pastors, determined that they needed to issue a pastoral letter addressed to migrants, public officials, and to Catholics of both countries. So, in January 2003, the bishops issued *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. I trust you are familiar with this important document, because it has served as the basis for the *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign.

Strangers No Longer receives its inspiration from Scripture and Catholic Social Teachings, as well as the present day reality for migrants. In this pastoral letter, the bishops state that one of their primary objectives is to “awaken our peoples to the mysterious presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the person of the migrant and to renew in them the values of the Kingdom of God ...”

So, *Strangers No Longer* prescribes a number of things that we as Catholics should do to respond to the needs of the migrants and to advocate for more just immigration laws. For instance, you will find in this pastoral letter the bishops’ prescription for reforming our nation’s immigration laws. The elements of the comprehensive reforms we are advocating are there: (1) addressing root causes of migration, (2) creating more legal avenues for filling job demands and reuniting families, (3) providing a pathway to citizenship for those who are contributing to our society, and (4) restoring due process to immigrants, especially for the most vulnerable.

Even as this pastoral letter was being studied by the body of bishops in both countries, the bishops on the migration committees of both Conferences began to plan how to collaborate on behalf of migrants in order to realize the vision contained in the letter.

U.S. Bishops Commit to *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign

In this country, the bishops on the USCCB Migration Committee and the Board of Directors of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network determined that to achieve the pastoral letter's educational and policy reform objectives, a broad coalition of Catholic organizations needed to be united in a national effort to (1) educate Catholics, (2) create a political climate for positive policy reforms, (3) engage in legislative advocacy, and (4) develop the legal services capacity within the Church to assist immigrants legalize their status.

And so, with the involvement of some 20 national Catholic organizations, the *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign was born.

When we came together to plan the Campaign, we identified the ingredients necessary for success. We considered things like:

- Broad based institutional involvement beyond the Church's traditional migration-related organizations.
- Church leadership's active engagement.
- Educational efforts directed toward Catholics.
- Grassroots, constituent-based lobbying efforts to compliment national lobbying.
- Effective media outreach.
- Ever broadening coalition in common cause.

Each bishop was asked to initiate a local JFI Campaign and to appoint someone to serve as a point-of-contact to the national Campaign. There are about 80 dioceses that have launched formal JFI Campaigns locally, but nearly all dioceses are actively engaged in one way or another in promoting the Campaign's goals.

We knew when we launched the Campaign that we were up against some pretty formidable challenges. We knew, for example, that Catholics, like many in this country, were split on the question of immigration, especially concerning those immigrants here without proper authorization. Polls indicated at the time that only about half of the Catholics believed that undocumented immigrants should be given an opportunity to regularize their status.

But, we also knew that much of what influenced Catholics' negative attitudes about immigration was based on misinformation and misperceptions. Catholics and others in this country labor under considerable misunderstandings that, when corrected, we have a chance to bring them to our side.

When we spoke to people who study Catholic attitudes toward social policies, we learned that there may be 15% to 20% of the Catholic population that, through more education, we could influence to our positions. We learned that these "swing" Catholics would likely be influenced either by having the facts that dispute the misinformation they have and/or by being more exposed to Church teachings on the subject of migration and how our faith should inform our attitudes toward newcomers.

So, as far as I am concerned, our biggest challenge is not the attacks from the immigration restrictionists, the racists, or the xenophobes. Our biggest challenge is ignorance!

Too many of our fellow Catholics believe the myths: immigrants are criminals; immigrants don't pay taxes; immigrants are a drain on public resources; immigrants don't want to integrate within our society; immigrants are taking our jobs. None of these perceptions are real. Yet, for many, many people perception is fact.

So, if we are ever going to bring about a change of hearts and minds; if we are ever going to bring people into an effective grassroots advocacy effort; if we are ever going to re-learn what it means to be an immigrant Church, we quite simply need to engage in education. We've got to debunk the myths. We've got to create empathy with our newest sisters and brothers. We've got to answer the question: "What would Jesus do?"

State of the JFI Campaign

When we were in the planning stages of developing the JFI Campaign, we asked ourselves, "what will constitute success?" "How will we know if the effort was a success?"

We thought of several outcomes that would demonstrate a successful Campaign: (1) when we have Catholics who embrace Gospel values toward newcomers and who are advocates for immigrants and migrants; (2) when we have achieved changes in federal laws that restore some sanity and humanity into the immigration system; and (3) when we have within the Church and society, newcomers being made to feel at home and are treated with dignity and respect.

This notion of trying to determine success reminds me of the old Jewish story in which a rabbi asks his students this question: "When does night end and day begin?"

"Is it the moment you can see the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree?" one student asked.

“No,” said the rabbi, “That’s not it.”

“Is it the moment you can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog?” asked another.

The rabbi shook his head and said, “No, that’s not it either.”

“Rather, it is the moment you look at the face of a stranger and recognize that it is really the face of your brother.”

This transformation of hearts and minds, of attitudes and understandings of who our sisters and brothers are, is what will represent success of our Campaign.

So, how are we doing?

My assessment is that it is a mixed bag. On the one hand, this unprecedented coalition within the Church has created a mobilization on behalf of immigrants and on behalf of legislative reforms that has made a difference. I am convinced that were there not this Campaign, we would be facing nothing but “get tougher” enforcement policies and further erosion of hospitality toward immigrants.

This Campaign, and all who have been associated with it, has influenced the debate and has created a climate in which the prospects of achieving the kinds of comprehensive reforms envisioned by the bishops are possible.

I have also been impressed at how active Church leaders have been in this Campaign. Many bishops have written and preached on the topic and have called on the faithful to adopt positive attitudes and become engaged in advocacy. The bishops and other Church leaders have confronted hostile audiences and faced backlashes from those opposed to immigration reforms. This has been one of those issues that has captured the imagination of Church leaders and animated them toward public actions, even when they are not popular.

This effort has also demonstrated to the immigrant communities that the Church is a voice for them. The Church is on the side of the marginalized and is trying to bring about a more just society. In many parts of the country, the Church and the immigrants are walking side by side in this movement. I have heard some describe this nationwide effort on the part of the Church as one of the best examples of what being Church means. That we are seeing her finest hour.

On the other side of the equation, though, I do not see us reaching the Catholics in the pews in the ways that will lead to sustainable changes in attitudes. There are certainly exceptions, but by and large, we are not engaged in the level of outreach and education necessary to bring another 15% to 20% of Catholics onto the side of advocacy for immigrants.

Moreover, if we neglect reaching the “average Catholic” we risk becoming a Church divided: the growing immigrant population within the Church and the others. Our vision for Catholics in this country having empathy for today’s immigrants and having Gospel attitudes toward them will not be realized.

Vision Going Forward

Looking ahead, I believe “education” is still job # one. We must be innovative and we must be willing to engage Catholics who may not at first want to hear our message. We must infuse into the educational curricula of our school systems, our adult education programs, and religious formation studies the Church’s teachings on migration. We’ve got to win hearts and minds.

We also need to more broadly engage Catholics in advocacy efforts. Our adversaries, though small in numbers, are extremely vocal with their elected representatives. They are well financed and extremely well organized. We cannot continue to allow members of Congress and the President to think that most Americans want to see more restrictive policies. We’ve got to raise our voices louder and multiply the number of voices.

Another thing we need to be about is organizing for a legalization program. Although we have quite a bit more heavy lifting to accomplish legislative reforms that include a legalization program, it is not too early to begin preparing both the immigrant communities and our own structures for a massive legalization effort. Given the potential numbers involved, this would represent an unprecedented undertaking, requiring extraordinary commitments and efforts.

In closing, I’d like to point to one other aspect of our vision for the future. That is coming back to this notion of relearning what it means to be an “immigrant Church.”

I believe we are at a moment in time within the Church in this country that, if handled properly, we could reawaken among our people a sense of solidarity with the “least of our brothers and sisters.” What a wonderful gift to the Church it would be if our efforts within this Campaign would result in more Catholics living out their faith by seeing in the face of newcomers the face of Christ.

How vibrant would our Church be if we became a more welcoming people? I can tell you this, if we Catholics in this country do not adopt more welcoming attitudes, we risk losing many people who will find this welcome elsewhere.

So, how do we go about this? I believe part of the answer lies in those assembled here this afternoon. This broad coalition, representing social action people, peace and justice advocates, legal, social, and pastoral service providers, and other leaders within the Church, if we continue to collaborate on behalf of immigrants, we can revitalize the Church, whose heritage is rooted in the immigrant experience.

By committing ourselves to helping all Catholics understand our faith imperatives toward migrants, we are offering them an opportunity to live out their faith. I can think of no greater gift.