

A Pastoral Statement on Immigration by the Catholic Bishops of New Mexico

The U.S. bishops have traditionally had a compassionate concern for immigrants and refugees. The Catholic Church of this country has a long history of extending a welcoming hand beginning with the great waves of immigration from Europe in the 19th Century. The Church has been instrumental in settling refugees from Vietnam, Cuba, and other countries from which people have fled due to religious and political persecution.

In the current debate on immigration, we, the bishops of New Mexico, join the U.S. bishops in favor of comprehensive immigration reform. Church teaching supports the rights of sovereign nations to protect their borders. Enforcement of our borders, however, should include the protection of basic human rights and the dignity of the migrant. While we do not approve illegal entry, once immigrants are here, they should be treated with decency and as human beings.

We do not support or encourage illegal immigration because it is contrary to federal law and because those living outside the legal structures are open to abuse, exploitation, and death in the desert. The Church advocates change of a broken law that would allow persons to enter the United States legally to work and support their families.

The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops supports the Senate bill, under the name “Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act” (S. 1033). Provisions in this bill include the development of a national strategy on border security which would enhance information-sharing among federal, state, and local authorities, integrate security technologies, and combat human smuggling. It also calls for increased cooperation with sending countries to manage the flow of nationals to the U.S., discourage unauthorized migration, improve job opportunities in sending countries, and identify potential terrorist threats.

We do not call for amnesty, rather, for “earned legalization,” which in S. 1033 requires undocumented workers to earn permanent status by working for six years on a temporary residency status before qualifying for legal permanent residency. It also requires responsibility of payments of fines, taxes and to attend classes of English as a second language.

Immigrants work in industries that do not attract sufficient U.S. workers. Over 80 percent of agricultural workers are foreign-born, while the majority of laborers in the meat packing and poultry industries are foreign-born. Over one-third of all dish washers, janitors, maids, and cooks, are foreign-born. If all undocumented workers were to be deported, the impact on our economy would be severe. The U.S. Department of Labor reported that last year 450,000 jobs went to foreign workers, yet there were only 10,000 worker visas available.

The Bible in the Gospel of Matthew calls us to “welcome the stranger,” for “what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me” (Mt. 25:35, 40). The U.S. bishops believe that the current immigration system contributes to human suffering and therefore we have a duty to point out the moral consequences of a broken system.

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