

*The Word Became Flesh (weekly column of Cardinal Rigali in the Catholic Standard and Times). Edition of May 4, 2006.*

### **Welcoming the Stranger, Welcoming Christ**

We Americans are tremendously proud of the cultural tapestry which has formed our great nation. Composed of immigrants from all over the world, the United States has opened its embrace and become home to all who have arrived at our shores bearing more dreams than belongings. We think of so many of our large cities with various ethnic neighborhoods. We recall how people from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds have learned from each other, complemented each other, and contributed to the growth and prosperity of our great land.

Here in Philadelphia, newcomers have helped revitalize our city by bringing energy and industry to our city neighborhoods. On a national level, immigrants, refugees, and other new arrivals have, over the years, infused new ideas, skills and culture into our country, making it the great nation it is today. We are a nation of immigrants and we are rightly proud of that fact.

As a local Church, we in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia appreciate deeply the wealth of religious and cultural traditions which have enhanced the liturgical and devotional practices within our parishes. Immigrants from Western and Eastern Europe planted here the seeds of a Church which, through times of trial and times of jubilation, has become vibrant. Further enhanced by immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean countries, Africa, Asia and Oceania, our local Church is a vivid and beautiful expression of the Universal Church, a true vision of what Catholicity means.

#### **Immigration Reform**

Lately, immigration has been cast in a negative light due to recent legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives concerning immigration policy. Much has been reported in the media concerning the impact which this legislation will have on our nation. Among its provisions, H.R. 4437 made all undocumented immigrants criminals; removed due process protection to asylum seekers and refugees, including children; and mandated the detention of families and other vulnerable groups along our border. It also subjected humanitarian workers, including Church workers, to five years in prison simply for providing basic needs assistance, such as food and water, to an undocumented immigrant. By standards of decency this is intolerable.

The extreme nature of this legislation, which disregards the significance of our nation's immigrant past, stirred significant emotional response, especially among those who recently immigrated to the United States. The surge of unrest caused by this legislation has been expressed in various ways. Public rallies and demonstrations have been held in recent weeks. Various sources of printed media have given considerable coverage to the plight of immigrants, most particularly human interest accounts which describe the

anxieties, struggles, uncertainties and hopes of immigrants. Religious denominations have stood in prayer, cooperation and support for a just Immigration Reform. Although the Senate Judiciary Committee amended some of the proposals, much more needs to be done to reform immigration policy in a just, humane and compassionate manner.

Efforts of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops The USCCB acknowledges the need, not just for repairs to our broken immigration system, but for a major shift in our approach to dealing with immigrants and refugees. The world has changed rapidly and, in many ways, violently. People arrive at the borders of the United States in search not only of a future, but also for security and peace for themselves and their families, just as our forebears did.

The Bishops urge Congress, along with President Bush, to enact comprehensive immigration legislation that reforms all aspects of our nation's immigration system. The Bishops recommend legislation which proposes an earned legalization program for the 11 million undocumented persons in the country. Such earned legalization is not amnesty because the proposal requires immigrants to work for up to six years before applying for legal permanent residency. The bill should include a temporary worker program, which would provide legal channels for migrant workers to migrate in a safe, legal and orderly manner. The legislation should allow for labor protection similar to those accorded U.S. workers. Strong consideration must also be given to family issues. The Bishops recommend reductions in pending family visa backlogs, which cause family separation for up to 10 years or more. This approach offers stronger security measures because it provides an incentive for undocumented immigrants and their families to "come out of the shadows" and identify themselves to government authorities.

The Church has a mandate from Christ to care for the strangers among us: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. \* Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25: 35-36, 40). Ours is a call to see in every other person the presence of the Son of God. In welcoming the stranger, we welcome Christ Himself. For this reason, the Bishops have taken a leading role in calling for comprehensive immigration reform that is rooted in charity and justice. In addition to direct appeals to Congress, the Bishops of the United States have sponsored a campaign to provide critical information to all of the faithful. The education and formation of the faithful in a proper understanding of immigration issues will aid greatly in producing just and merciful immigration reform. Detailed information has been provided to all parishes. This information can also be found on a Web site sponsored by the USCCB: [www.justiceformigrants.org](http://www.justiceformigrants.org).

We must remain ever mindful of the difficult and painful circumstances which cause many to leave their homelands and their families to seek a new beginning. War, violence, oppression and poverty are the lot of millions of innocent people. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2006 message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, stated: "The Church sees this

entire world of suffering and violence through the eyes of Jesus, who was moved with pity at the sight of the crowd wandering as sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mt 9: 36). Hope, courage, love and 'creativity in charity'

(Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 50) must inspire the necessary human and Christian efforts made to help these brothers and sisters in their suffering."

Those who arrive at our borders or upon our shores come because they know of the generosity of the American spirit. They know as well that we work together to preserve freedom and human dignity. Our nation stands at a critical juncture in its history. Before venturing down the path of exclusion and intolerance, we must remember that, with the exception of Native American Indians, we all are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who came to this nation burdened by anxieties but buoyed by vast hopes. As I have said before: Motivated by true charity, we can together create an immigration system that reflects our national values and our Christian convictions, promotes our national security and is worthy of our great nation, a nation enriched by an immigrant culture that must always defend the dignity of every human being in our land.