History always provides us with important perspective as we seek to understand current public policy debates. This is especially true for immigration. While it may be tempting to judge the actions of undocumented immigrants today against the actions of our immigrant ancestors, the legal landscape has changed so dramatically over time that it is difficult to make direct and accurate comparisons. Immigration is also part of our history as Catholics in America. In fact, the first U.S. citizen to become a saint – Frances Xavier Cabrini – was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the patroness of immigrants.

Generous immigration policies brought 33 million European immigrants to America between 1821 and 1924. The only European immigrants barred from entering the United States before 1921 were criminals, the mentally ill, anarchists, communists and those employed in vice industries. Only two percent of arrivals at Ellis Island were denied entry, usually for public health reasons or concerns that the person would become a public charge. All other European immigrants could enter unrestricted and visas did not exist. Canadian and Mexican immigrants enjoyed similarly generous policies, while Asians’ immigration opportunities were severely restricted and hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced to come to America through the slave trade. What is now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services was not created until 1891 and the Border Patrol not until 1924.

Between 1900 and 1910, an average of nearly one million immigrants came to America each year. The first major restriction on European immigration was put in place in 1921, when the total number of new immigrants was limited to 360,000 annually and a quota was established for new arrivals from each nation. In 1924, the quota was reduced to 165,000 new arrivals annually and adjusted to favor immigrants from northwest Europe over those from southern and eastern European nations like Italy and Poland.

Immigrants today – like those of the past – come to America to build better lives for their families and to escape economic, political and religious injustice, even if only temporarily. Millions left Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s because of the threat of starvation from the potato famine and the threat of persecution from British penal codes. Most Italian immigrants were young, single men who migrated along kinship networks and planned to stay in America only temporarily to save money to support their families back home. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 50 percent of Italian immigrants returned to Italy. Some of those immigrating today will also return to their homelands, but others, because of family ties, work, and love for our country, will stay and add to the rich human mosaic that is the United States of America.

3. Ibid, 79.