

Statements of the United States Bishops

The Bishops applied the Gospel teachings and the teachings of the Popes to current immigration realities. In January, 2003, the U.S. Bishops and the Bishops of Mexico issued a joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In that document, the U.S. bishops articulated the following five principles that govern how the Church responds to public policy principles relating to immigration.

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

This principle states that a person has a right not to migrate. In other words, economic, social, and political conditions in their homeland should provide an opportunity for a person to work and support his or her family in dignity and safety. In public policy terms, efforts should be made to address global economic inequities through just trade practices, economic development, and debt relief. Peacemaking efforts should be advanced to end conflict which forces people to flee their homes.

2. Persons have the right to migrate to find work and support themselves and their families.

When persons are unable to find work and support themselves and their families, they have a right to migrate to other countries and work. This right is not absolute, as stated by Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* when he said this right to emigrate applies when “there are just reasons for it.” In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty is rampant and political unrest has resulted in wars and persecution, migrants who are forced to leave their homes out of necessity and seek only to survive and support their families must be given special consideration.

3. Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of the sovereign nation to control its borders in the service of the common good of its citizens. However, this is not an absolute right. Nations also have an obligation and thus should seek to accommodate migration to the greatest extent possible. Powerful economic nations, such as the United States, have a higher obligation to serve the universal common good, according to Catholic social teachings. In the current global economic environment, in which labor demands in the United States attract foreign laborers, the United States should establish an immigration system that provides legal avenues for persons to enter the nation legally in a safe, orderly, and dignified manner to obtain jobs and reunite with family members.

4. Refugees and Asylum Seekers should be afforded protection.

Persons who flee their home countries because they fear persecution should be afforded safe haven and protection in another country. Conflict and political unrest in many parts of the world force persons to leave their homes for fear of death or harm. The United States should employ a refugee and asylum system that protects asylum seekers, refugees, and other forced migrants and offers them a haven from persecution.

5. The human rights and human dignity of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Persons who enter a nation without proper authorization or who over-stay their visas should be treated with respect and dignity. They should not be detained in deplorable conditions for lengthy periods of time, shackled by their feet and hands, or abused in any manner. They should be afforded due process of the law and, if applicable, allowed to articulate a fear of return to their home before a qualified adjudicator. They should not be blamed for the social ills of a nation.

What Our Bishops Ask For in Immigration Reform

1. Global anti-poverty efforts

Why are migrants coming? The United States needs to resume bilateral migration negotiations with Mexico so that all issues which impact migration to the United States, including trade and economic considerations, are addressed. Examining only the immigration systems of each nation will not control the forces that compel migrants to come to the United States.

The next 3 points are essential. Without addressing each leg in this three-legged stool, any immigration reform proposal will prove inadequate and eventually fail.

2. Broad-based legalization

Allow undocumented migrants of all nationalities in the United States the opportunity to earn permanent residency and eventual citizenship. Note: The program should not be so complicated as to be unworkable, nor should the requirements be so onerous as to discourage qualified applicants, e.g., participants should not be required to return to their homelands to apply.

3. Temporary worker program

The U.S. and Mexican Bishops have proposed a new worker program that features the same wage levels and benefits as domestic workers; protects the basic rights of all workers, both foreign and domestic; allows for mobility and job portability; allows a worker to bring spouse and children; orders a labor-market test to ensure good-faith efforts to recruit U.S. workers first; incorporates enforcement of worker protections; and provides a path to permanent residency over time.

4. Expanded opportunities to reunify families

The family is the core of our society and culture. Therefore, do not replace family-based immigration with a point system (allocating visas based on high scores in certain categories). Family reunification must remain the cornerstone of all U.S. immigration policy, but with substantial changes to reduce wait times.

5. Restoration of Due Process

All migrants must be assured of their basic right to due process in all dealings with the United States Government. In particular, for asylum-seekers, "expedited removal" must be altered and at minimum, the strong safeguards suggested by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom should be instituted to prevent the return of the persecuted to their persecutors.

6. Targeted, Proportional, and Humane Enforcement

Focus on those with criminal intent. Do not impose unnecessary penalties nor use unnecessary force. Do not funnel migrants into desert routes. Preserve the dignity and human rights of all.



Answering Tough Questions about Immigration

U.S. bishops advocate mending broken system and improving economic development in poor countries

Our Sunday Visitor: May 16, 2010

Editor's note: In light of the recent debate over Arizona's new immigration law and responses to Archbishop Jose H. Gomez's essay "Archbishop: Catholics' role in immigration reform solution" in our May 2 issue, Our Sunday Visitor asked Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Migration, to answer some of our readers' toughest questions about the Church's position on immigration.

Question: What don't the bishops understand about "illegal"? Why disrespect the rule of law?

Answer: The U.S. bishops and the teachings of the Catholic Church have consistently respected the right of the sovereign to control its borders, as well as the rule of civil law. However, the Church, along with other members of our democratic society, has the right to work to change laws which are believed to violate basic human dignity, dignity imbued by the Creator.

In the case of immigration, the U.S. bishops believe that the broken U.S. immigration system contributes to the exploitation of migrant workers in the workplace; their abuse by ruthless smugglers; and their deaths in the desert as they seek to find work to support their families. They come illegally because there are insufficient visas under the current system to come legally. Our system contains only 5,000 permanent visas for unskilled laborers to come to the United States, but the demand for their work is much higher, since as many as 300,000 undocumented people each year are absorbed into the U.S. workforce.

Comprehensive immigration reform, which the U.S. bishops support, would replace illegality with a system based on legal presence and legal entry, thus restoring the rule of law to a chaotic system while also protecting the basic dignity, and lives, of our fellow brothers and sisters. It would require those who have broken the law to get on the right side of it by paying a fine, taxes, learning English and waiting in the back of a long line to have a chance to become a U.S. citizen. This "path to citizenship" is in the best interests of migrants, who are able to become full members of their communities, and our nation, which will continue to benefit from their contributions without sacrificing our long-held values as a nation of immigrants: freedom, fairness and opportunity.

Question: Is this welcoming of Latinos because they are Catholic? If not, do you also support opening our borders to impoverished people from Arab and Asian countries?

Answer: The support of the U.S. bishops for immigration reform is not because the majority of immigrants at this point in our history are Latino or Catholic. The Catholic Church heeds Our Lord's call to "welcome the stranger" to all children of God, regardless of their ethnicity, national origin, race or religion. This is evident in all of the social-service programs of the Catholic Church, which base their outreach on "need," not "creed."

That said, the fact that the majority of immigrants are Catholic makes it more real for many Catholics since many immigrants are present in our service programs, health care centers, schools and parishes. We, as a Catholic community, directly witness the human consequences of a broken system each day, when immigrant families come to pastors and employees and ask for help for a family member who has been detained or deported by immigration authorities. We can only help these families, and keep them together, by changing our immigration laws.

Finally, despite assertions to the contrary, the U.S. bishops do not support "open borders," but support generous, but reasonable, immigration policies that serve the common good.

Continued on back

Question: The current situation of illegal immigration is causing an unsustainable strain on social services. Do the bishops not see that as a problem?

Answer: There are several myths in this area. First of all, most studies show that, although at an early age immigrants consume more than they contribute, over a lifetime they are net contributors to our economy through the taxes they pay, the goods they produce and consume, and their labor. Moreover, legal immigrants do not qualify for welfare or health care for the first five years of their residency in the United States, while undocumented immigrants never qualify for such benefits. In fact, undocumented immigrants pay billions in income taxes each year and at least \$7 billion in Social Security taxes, helping to sustain Social Security for the baby-boomer generation.

By adopting comprehensive immigration reform and providing the undocumented legal status, the United States would receive even more income taxes and Social Security payments from immigrants, since they would be required to register with the government and pay their full share.

Question: Why should not the priority be on the development in the countries the immigrants come from so they do not want to come here in the first place?

Answer: In fact, the U.S. bishops have stated that Congress should look at the “push factors,” such as the lack of living-wage employment, that compel immigrants to leave their home countries and risk their lives to come to the United States in search of jobs.

As a global institution, the Catholic Church believes that the most humane and effective long-term solution to irregular immigration is economic development in poorer countries, so that people can stay in their home countries and support their families in dignity. In the context of the current immigration debate, this is the Church’s answer to a border wall, which will not prevent irregular migration over the long term. The Church believes that migration should ultimately be driven by choice, not necessity.

Question: What kind of immigration reform do the bishops want exactly? Amnesty? Open borders?

Answer: Neither. The U.S. bishops’ prescription for mending our broken system is to bring the 11 million undocumented out of the shadows, register them with the government, require them to pay a fine and any taxes owed, and require them to learn English and work as they wait in the back of the line for a chance for citizenship. This is not “amnesty,” which is generally defined as granting a benefit without anything in return. The U.S. bishops would also support an increase in family-based and employment-based visas so that immigrant families could migrate to the United States in a safe, legal and controlled manner, and not be subject to the abuse of human smugglers or to death in the desert.

It is our view that making changes to the legal immigration system will help ease pressure on our border by taking undocumented immigrants out of the enforcement equation, freeing up law enforcement to focus upon those who are here to harm us – drug smugglers, human traffickers, and would-be terrorists – and not those simply looking for a job.

We also believe, as mentioned earlier, that Congress should examine how the root causes of migration can be addressed, so that migrants can stay where they are and work in dignity.

Bishop John C. Wester heads the Diocese of Salt Lake City and is Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration.