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Immigration Reform: *recognize that every man and woman is the image of God*

Reform of the nation's immigration laws stirs national and local interest. As we work to secure a public policy that treats immigrants justly, I and the other three Catholic Bishops of Kentucky ask that our discourse be civil and our solutions reflect that each person is the image and likeness of God.

The president and Congress acknowledge that our immigration system is broken and want to change the status quo. All parties to the immigration debate ought to be able to agree on two basic facts: 1) our nation and economy benefit from the work of immigrants, both undocumented and legal, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future; and 2) because of economic underdevelopment in their homelands, migrants are going to continue to migrate, even risking their lives, to work and support their families.

Current policies ignore these realities. For example, after spending \$25 billion on a border "blockade" enforcement strategy for the past ten years, the net number of undocumented entering the U.S. has risen from 300,000 to nearly 500,000 per year. More disturbing is the fact that more than 2700 migrants died since the beginning of the blockades, perishing in remote portions of the American Southwest.

About eighty percent of those who make it into the United States find employment in short order. They contribute billions to our tax and Social Security systems. The Labor Department estimates that, by the year 2008, there will be six million more low-skilled jobs available than Americans able to fill them.

Our current system, instead of discouraging undocumented migration, makes it inevitable. Work visas for unskilled workers are too few in number compared to the demand—5,000 in the permanent system and up to 66,000 in the temporary one. Family unity visas can be even scarcer, with waiting times as long as ten years for Mexican families to be reunited.

For migrants desperate to find work or to join their family members, there are few options, none of which are desirable: cross a deadly desert, pay unscrupulous smugglers, or both.

Responding to the two basic facts requires a comprehensive overhaul of U.S. immigration policies. We urge comprehensive immigration reform that includes these three major components.

First, any legalization program should permit undocumented, long-term residents access to permanent residency. This stabilizes immigrant families and the labor force.

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

Second, any employment-based legal immigration system must increase legal avenues to work while protecting the rights of both foreign-born and U.S. workers. This permits future flows of workers to enter safely and legally and reduce deaths at the border.

Finally, the plan should shorten waiting times under the family reunification system. Our current system often separates husbands from wives and parents from children, a morally unacceptable outcome in a nation built upon the strength of the family.

Over the long-term, the United States must do more to promote sustainable economic development in sending countries so that migrant workers can remain home and support their families in dignity. Despite popular belief, migrants prefer to remain in their homelands.

As a social service provider with global reach, the Catholic Church is deeply troubled by the causes of undocumented migration and its consequences, especially for the migrant who we see as our brother and sister.

Those opposing comprehensive reform ignore the human tragedy and familial dislocation of the status quo. They discount the invaluable contributions immigrants make to our nation. They reap the benefits of undocumented laborers, but refuse them the protection of the law. They cannot have it both ways.

Our elected leaders know the status quo is unacceptable. Now is the time to enact comprehensive reform. Comprehensive reform of our immigration policy not only protects human rights and prepares our nation for the challenges of the future, but it also recognizes the human life and dignity of all immigrants, legal and illegal. We invite Catholics and all people of good will to welcome the benefits of migration by rejecting every form of discrimination, injustice and contempt of the persons coming to our land, for every immigrant is the image of God.

+John J. McRaith
Bishop of Owensboro

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