

# - A REFLECTION ON - ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

FROM CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT BISHOPS IN KANSAS

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*This is a reflection from Kansas Church leaders on issues related to undocumented immigrants. Its purpose is to assist in the formation of consciences and to contribute to the public discussion on the topic.*

Our country's openness to immigrants is not in question. With the exception of native peoples, we are a nation of immigrants, many of whom came here to escape religious persecution, political oppression or poverty.

We are in fact a country famous for welcoming immigrants. Consider the inscription on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" – this expresses what we want to say to others.

"YOU MUST  
BEFRIEND THE  
ALIEN FOR YOU  
WERE ONCE  
ALIENS  
YOURSELVES."  
(DEUTERONOMY 10:19)

Welcoming immigrants is likewise part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. "You must befriend the alien for you were once aliens yourselves" (*Deuteronomy 10:19*). "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (*Matthew 25:35*).

What we are presently faced with, however, is the need for a response to illegal immigration, issues related to people crossing our borders at will, living and working here without permission.

This issue should be of concern for all peoples because of how it is related to the bigger issue of the rule of law.

As Christians, we are not indifferent to laws, the question of legality, or our duty to observe laws. Consider the biblical exhortation: "Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake ... Give honor to all, love the community, fear God, honor the king" (*1 Peter 2:13, 17; cf. Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1*).

The rule of law is important to who we are as citizens of the United States. It is a unifying force for a nation of people from diverse races, colors and creeds. This notion is even enshrined in a popular patriotic song: "America, America, God mend thine ev'ry flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, *thy liberty in law*."

The basis of the rule of law is the sacredness of human life and the dignity of each human person. These values are enshrined in our country's Constitution and are ideally expressed in the laws that govern us and are protected by our courts.

No one is above the law. Likewise, no person is supposed to be without the law's protection. It is intended that laws be applied fairly and equally to all people for their protection and to promote the common good.

The common good can be understood as thinking not only of me, but of we as well; not only of mine, but ours too. We obey laws, which sometimes require us to deny an individual choice, and sometimes even to forego a personal right, for the sake of the common good. Put another way, the rule of law is how love of neighbor is practiced in a social framework. Speed limits, paying taxes and immigration policy are examples of laws which promote the common good.

People must of course agree to obey the law. Without obedience to laws, selfishness reigns and there follows as a result either tyranny or anarchy; there is no peace, no prosperity.

In consideration of the above, thinking about the issue of illegal immigration, and hoping not to over-simplify the issue, there are several points for reflection.

Given the tyranny or anarchy that would result if the rule of law were ignored, obeying laws should be of serious concern to citizens and to undocumented immigrants alike.

Among the civil laws that govern the common good is a country's right and duty to secure its borders and control in an orderly way the flow of immigrants.

Speaking of immigrants, every person has a right to emigrate, especially when those things needed to live in human dignity – productive work and fair wages, food and shelter, education and health care, and protection from harm – are out-of-reach in one's native land.

Moreover, a prosperous country, like the United States, has a duty to receive the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

But these rights and duties are not absolute. The right of people to immigrate and the duty of a country to admit immigrants are affected by whether or not there are adequate resources in the receiving country to be shared among all peoples.

The United States is only being responsible when it asks if there are enough resources available to respond to the needs of both those already in the nation's family, so to speak, and those immigrating with the prospect of being adopted.

In this regard, exercising stewardship for the common good, deference should be given to those who are already citizens because, as they say, charity starts at home (cf. *1 Timothy 5:4*).

### **So, what can be done in response to illegal immigration?**

We encourage voters to insist that the federal government bring about comprehensive immigration reform.

Such reform would likely include more effective efforts to secure our country's borders. But a companion piece would be an improved admission process, one that does not involve inordinately lengthy waiting periods, which sometimes results in long separation of family members.

“... WHATEVER YOU  
DID FOR ONE  
OF THESE LEAST  
BROTHERS OF  
MINE, YOU DID  
FOR ME.”

(MATTHEW 25:40)

We also encourage voters to advocate for a practical and humane response by the federal government to undocumented immigrants who are already living here. It is just too simplistic to say to them: “What part of illegal don't you understand?” It also seems unworkable to deport all undocumented immigrants, telling them to go to the back of the line of applicants seeking legal entrance into our country.

Perhaps, in keeping with the rule of law, a penalty commensurate with entering the country without permission could be imposed on undocumented

immigrants. This could be part of a process to allow otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants to earn citizenship or gain legal status.

### **What else can be done?**

We might review our attitudes and actions towards immigrants. It is true that undocumented immigrants broke the law in coming or staying here without permission. But with the exception of criminal types, who should be arrested and deported, most undocumented immigrants are God-fearing, church-going, hard-working and family-oriented folk, who just want to have a chance for those things needed to live in human dignity.

We should regard others without suspicion about their legal status, and behave towards them in a neighborly and gracious manner. In this regard, it would be wrong to take advantage of the legal status of undocumented immigrants, subjecting them on that account to poor working conditions or wages.

“LOVE ONE  
ANOTHER  
AS I HAVE  
LOVED YOU.”

(JOHN 13:34)

And why would we be anything but welcoming and helpful, remembering our personal and national stories? A yet stronger motive is given in the teachings of Jesus: “[I was] a stranger and you welcomed me ... whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (*Matthew 25:35, 40*). “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus says (see *John 13:34*).

Undocumented immigrants who are already living here can also contribute to turning things around, for example, by accepting a penalty for entering the country illegally; obeying laws and paying taxes; and investing in life here by learning English and the ways things are done in the United States, like flying our country’s flag on a national holiday. Such actions would not only contribute to their enjoying life and success here, but also show respect to others living here.

In this regard, the message God gave the prophet Jeremiah for the Jews living in Babylon is relevant to all immigrants, legal or otherwise: build houses, get married, have children, see their children married, and promote the welfare of the country, for upon its welfare depends your own (cf. *Jeremiah 29:4-7*). In essence, settle down and take part in life here.

This does not mean that immigrants forget their native language and customs. On the contrary, our country is blessed thanks to the cultural exchange of immigrants living here. Cultural treasures, like language, customs, food, music, and festivals should be preserved in the home, churches and cultural associations.

Once again, the purpose of this reflection is to assist in the formation of consciences and to contribute to the public discussion on issues related to undocumented immigrants.

Much is at stake with the immigration issue, for example: the security of our nation (especially from the threat of terrorists); the vigor of our economy; the common good of our citizenry; and our country’s fame for being a place where people can find refuge and hope, just to name a few.

The issue of immigration is a matter of prudential judgment. As such, it is possible for people of good will to disagree on how our country’s immigration policy should be reformed. Any difference of opinion notwithstanding, perhaps we can agree that something must be done.

Furthermore, while we may propose different answers for immigration reform, there is no reason why we cannot engage in this dialogue with mutual respect and reasonableness.

Whatever is decided, the way forward for our country's immigration policy should uphold the rule of law, protect and promote the common good, and give as much attention to duties as to rights (for example, securing the country's borders and ensuring an application process that is fair and speedy).

All this will hopefully enable us – citizens and immigrants – to live together as one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty *and* justice for all.

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