

God's Welcoming Presence: A Call To Stand In Solidarity With Ohio's Immigrants

*A Message From The Catholic Bishops Of Ohio
To All Catholics And Others Of Good Will*

"Immigrant workers, regardless of their status, are vital participants in our economy. Yet their dignity and rights are often abused and their important contributions to our society ignored. Our nation must treat immigrants fairly and with dignity, and honor their important contributions to our society."

Joint statement on U.S. Immigration Policy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Migration, and AFL-CIO, March 2000.

God's love transcends every human barrier, language, culture, and country border. The Gospel calls us to welcome immigrants with compassion and hopeful expectation. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matt. 25:35). These words challenge each of us to see the dignity and sacredness of God that is reflected through people of all cultures and nations, regardless of legal status. Recently Pope John Paul II stated: *"Who is my neighbor? The neighbor is every human being, without exception. It is not necessary to ask his nationality, or to which social or religious group he belongs. If he is in need, he must be helped."*¹

In November, 2000, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral statement entitled, "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity." It is a national call to welcome immigrants.² As one way of responding to this call, we encourage increased pastoral outreach and public solidarity for immigrant workers in Ohio. Ohio has a growing immigrant population in need of welcome and support. Most of these immigrants have left their homelands due to overwhelming poverty, civil strife and natural disasters. Many of them are undocumented. The majority come from Mexico and Central America. They have been recruited to labor year round in food processing plants, plastic factories and landscape nurseries throughout Ohio. Most are here to support their families back home.

This past year, the Rural Life, Social Action and Hispanic Ministry Directors from our dioceses, in collaboration with many immigrant programs around the state, developed an outreach project

entitled "We Gather and Stand Together."³ This project has established a statewide leadership board and hired staff to develop and implement programs and actions that address the social justice needs of Hispanic immigrant workers. One important vision of this project is to promote dialogue and collaboration between and among documented and undocumented immigrant workers, employers and governmental officials. Employers need the workers, workers need the jobs, and government officials need assurances of appropriate safeguards. Today we are encouraging Ohio's civic and religious leaders to prioritize efforts that will help such a vision to succeed.

Call For A Statewide Study

The "We Gather and Stand Together" Project staff interviewed several hundred migrant workers across the state and assembled a report on the interrelationships, dynamics, realities, and visions of these people.⁴ The report estimates that there are close to seventy thousand immigrant workers within Ohio. Their concerns include housing, transportation, medical care, language education, working conditions and legal status. In light of these concerns, we encourage public officials to undertake a statewide study that would develop recommendations to:

- **Ensure the fair treatment and safe working conditions for immigrant workers.**
- **Enhance supportive services for immigrants including housing, health**

care, and education (especially English as a Second Language).

- **Address questions of legal status and/or improvements in immigration policies.**
- **Strengthen collaborative efforts between workers and employers that respect personal dignity and human rights, and provide working models for negotiations and conflict resolution.**
- **Strengthen the economic viability of rural farms and businesses needing to employ immigrant workers.**
- **Assure the full participation of immigrant workers in the decision-making processes that shape social, political and economic lives.**
- **Explore ways federal, state, and local programs can work together to provide needed services, enhanced cultural awareness, and helpful public policies.**

Call For Increased Pastoral Outreach And Cultural Sensitivity

We applaud the dedicated pastoral work being performed by diocesan staff within our Hispanic Ministry offices, by migration and refugee workers, and by so many caring parish leaders and parishioners. We support increased efforts within our diocesan and parish structures to create and pursue the enhanced delivery of pastoral care opportunities to our brothers and sisters immigrating to Ohio. We recognize the need in some areas to create supportive structures where they do not yet exist. We encourage new approaches to pastoral care demonstrated by initiatives like the “Mobile Ministry Team” project. This emerging inter-diocesan project combines the resources of several dioceses to minister to the spiritual,

social service, and justice needs of immigrants within Northeastern Ohio.

We also call upon our parish leaders and educators to promote a welcoming environment and a heightened awareness of the gifts and strengths, hopes and fears, struggles and needs of immigrant families. We call upon our seminaries and ministry training programs to help participants develop the language capabilities they need in order to minister appropriately to new immigrant populations. We also encourage the further development of training programs and seminars that promote awareness and understanding of the various Spanish-speaking cultures. We should all work toward increasing the multilingual capacities of our diocesan and parish structures.

We believe each person has opportunities to reach out in welcome to immigrant workers. Consider the following questions:

- **Are we as a society, as church, as employers, as consumers treating immigrants with dignity and justice?**
- **Do my own attitudes toward immigrants reflect God’s love and concern for all persons?**
- **How am I involved in reaching out to new immigrants in support of their pastoral and material needs?**
- **What am I willing to do on behalf of the justice needs of immigrants?**

We encourage parish, community and individual support for the “We Gather and Stand Together” project. This project urges the empowerment of leaders within the immigrant communities. It encourages dialogue and collaboration among workers, owners and civic leaders. It calls for social justice, and it promotes solidarity with immigrant workers through initiatives such as English as a Second Language classes, job mentoring, crisis

intervention, cultural exchanges, family visitations, faith based celebrations, public dialogues, coalition building, fundraising and social justice advocacy. Information about ways that parishes and individuals can participate more fully in this project is available through the Diocesan Rural Life Offices or the Catholic Conference of Ohio.

May God bless these efforts. May Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of the Americas, intercede on our behalf so that we may be united in solidarity with all our sisters and brothers of faith.

February 2001

¹ Aug. 22, 1997, Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, France.

² The National Conference of Catholic Bishops also released their "Resolution on Immigration Reform" at this same time. Copies of both statements, either in English or Spanish, can be obtained from the United States Catholic Conference Office for Publishing and Promotion Services; 1-800-235-8722 or www.nccbuscc.org.

³ Other groups involved in the project include Escuela Popular, Rural Opportunities, Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and Advocates for Basic Legal Equality.

⁴ Copies of the full report are available from the Catholic Conference of Ohio; 614-224-7147.



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