



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

IMMIGRATION REFORM

USCCB JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS CAMPAIGN

Security Concerns

Don't the millions of undocumented workers in this country pose a potential security threat? Shouldn't we deport them?

The economic implications of such a proposition, both in terms of the costs of undertaking such an effort and the ramifications of losing so many millions of workers for which our economy is dependent, make it infeasible. The Catholic bishops believe, however, that by offering undocumented immigrants a legal path to permanent residency, they will come forward and make themselves known to authorities. For security purposes, it would be much better to know who these individuals are and to provide them an opportunity to come out of the shadows.

Our nation is in a war on terrorism; shouldn't we be sealing our borders entirely?

The Catholic bishops believe, as do many others who have objectively studied the question of border enforcement, that no border enforcement strategy will be effective in keeping determined people out unless it is combined with policy changes that address the push and pull factors that compel immigrants to come here.

From 1993 to 2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled. Yet, the number of unauthorized arrivals increased. Moreover, U.S. border enforcement strategies have channeled migrants to more remote crossing points, resulting in increased fatalities, a growth in smugglers and traffickers, and reduced chances of apprehension.

Our nation's security concerns would be better met by having an immigration system that allows well-intentioned immigrants the opportunity to enter in a more timely fashion through legal means, thereby allowing enforcement resources to be focused on would-be terrorists, smugglers and other criminals who would try to circumvent and manipulate the system to gain entry.

Catholic Church's Positions on Immigration

Why does the church care about immigration policies?

The Catholic Church has historically held a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scriptural and Catholic social teachings, as well as her own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of those who are marginalized and whose God-given rights are not respected.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to the undermining of immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of persons in this country in an unauthorized capacity, living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited. And, our nation's border enforcement strategies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of migrants.

The Church has a responsibility to shine the message of God on this issue and help to build bridges between all parties so that an immigration system can be created that is just for all and serves the common good, including the legitimate security concerns of our nation.

Does the Catholic Church support illegal immigration?

The Catholic Bishops do not condone unlawful entry or circumventions of our nation's immigration laws. The bishops believe that reforms are necessary in order for our nation's immigration system to respond to the realities of separated families and labor demands that compel people to immigrate to the United States, whether in an authorized or unauthorized fashion.

Our nation's economy demands foreign labor, yet there are insufficient visas to meet this demand. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents face interminable separations, sometimes of twenty years or longer, due to backlogs of available visas. U.S. immigration laws and policies need to be updated to reflect these realities.

Does the Catholic Church support "amnesty"?

The Catholic bishops are proposing an earned legalization for those in this country in an unauthorized status and who have built up equities and are otherwise admissible. "Amnesty," as commonly understood, implies a pardon and a reward for those who did not obey immigration laws, creating inequities for those who wait for legal entry. The bishops' proposal is not an "amnesty."

The Bishops' earned legalization proposal provides a window of opportunity for undocumented immigrants who are already living in our communities and contributing to our nation to come forward, pay a fine and application fee, go through rigorous criminal background checks and security screenings, demonstrate that they have paid taxes and are learning English, and obtain a visa that could lead to permanent residency, over time.

National Legislative Proposals

Some opponents of your position claim that your faithful do not agree with your position and that you are misrepresenting their views. How would you respond to that assertion?

We recognize that the issue of immigration is an emotional and divisive one. We recognize that not all of our faithful will agree with the Church teaching on this particular issue. However, the bishops are obligated as leaders of our Church to educate Catholics about the Church teaching and to attempt to convince them that the Church position is the correct one. We have not come to our position lightly—it is based on Gospel and Church teaching, evolved from papal writings, over a long period of time. It is our understanding, from experts who know about the views of Catholics, that there is a majority of Catholics who are unaware of the Church position and may not have a strong opinion on immigration. This is why we launched the Justice for Immigrants' campaign, to educate the faithful on the importance of the issue to the Church and to our brothers and sisters who are immigrants. Not everyone will agree with us, but with God's grace we may be able to change the hearts and minds of a large number.

You say that immigration is a moral issue. Some claim that breaking the laws of the United States is an immoral act and that the Church is condoning such behavior. How would you respond to that?

Let me say that the Church does not condone or encourage illegal immigration because it is not good for society or for the migrant, who lives outside the law and in the shadows. What we are trying to do is change our laws to reflect the reality of migration in the world today and to ensure that basic human rights and dignity are respected. Yes, those in the United States without legal status have broken the law, but they do so in order to survive and to support their families. At the same time, they contribute to our economy through their hard work and work in important industries. So we must consider if the law is a just one and whether it is in the best interest of the nation to change the law. We obviously think the law should be changed.

H.R. 4437 makes it a crime to assist an undocumented alien. You say that this could affect church workers and other humanitarian workers. Does that mean that church workers do actively assist undocumented immigrants to remain in the country? Does the Church, thus, encourage undocumented immigrants by helping them?

The Church has many social service, legal, or health programs which assist immigrants. The law does not require us to ask an immigrant for documentation before providing assistance. We believe that is the correct policy, since we are not law enforcement specialists—we respond to human need. The provision in the House bill would criminalize anyone who assists an undocumented person knowingly or with reckless disregard to whether a person is undocumented. This could be providing them a meal in a soup kitchen or any kind of basic needs assistance. As human service providers, we should not be forced to pick winners and losers or turn someone away who is in need. Humanitarian and church workers, as well as any other Good Samaritan, should not be considered criminals by showing acts of mercy.

The sponsors of H.R. 4437 claim that the provision which allegedly criminalizes church workers for assisting undocumented immigrants will not be enforced, that it is more designed to apprehend and prosecute smugglers and traffickers. Do you agree with this assessment?

No. The sponsors can find a way to apprehend and prosecute smugglers and traffickers without placing church personnel and property at risk. They should re-examine the language and eliminate what would harm church workers who perform acts of charity.

Some claim that the Church is for open borders. Do you have a position on the enforcement of immigration laws?

The church supports the right of the sovereign nation to control its borders. That is not the issue here. The issue is that the immigration system, which includes enforcement, is flawed and needs repair. As an example, our nation has spent nearly \$25 billion on border enforcement over the past ten years, yet the undocumented population has more than doubled in the same time period. We need a new approach. We believe that by reforming the legal immigration system we will take pressure off of the enforcement side and relieve the pressure on our borders. Creating legal avenues for migration will reduce the need of migrants to cross the desert and to depend on human smuggling. We also believe our proposals are pro-security. By legalizing the 11 million undocumented in our nation, for example, we know who is here. By creating a temporary worker program and improving family immigration, we also know who is coming.

What do you say to members of your faithful who are U.S. citizens, may be struggling economically, and have trouble with finding jobs which in many cases undocumented immigrants may be filling?

As we have said, we do not believe that undocumented immigration is good for society or the migrant. In some cases, it is not good for the U.S. worker because it can drive down wages. That is why we are trying to change the status quo so that a legal immigrant work force can bargain for higher wages, driving up wages for everyone. We also believe any temporary worker program should ensure that U.S. workers are protected and have the “first bite at the apple,” or the first shot at a job.

As you know, migrant workers labor in low-skill but important jobs, such as agricultural workers, as construction workers, and as service personnel. As President Bush has stated, many Americans are not working for those jobs or competing for them.