

## Welcoming Christ in the Migrant A Conversation about Immigration

### 1. Recent Law & Policies

Immigration is part of the heritage of the US, but the laws and policies restricting immigration are much more recent, mostly dating from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us look at the most recent ones:

- 1986        Amnesty of undocumented (which only legalized half those eligible), SSN required for work and the I-9 form with visas.  
Result: because there has been very little enforcement at work places, undocumented are able to find work and the flow of immigration has raised. In addition many coming in the US illegally are able to buy forged SSN.
- 2001        Immigration went under the Department of Homeland Security responsibility.  
Result: there has been more enforcement, especially detentions and deportations.
- 2005        The REAL ID ACT created new national standards for state-issued driver licenses and non-driver identification cards.  
Result: undocumented immigrants cannot get or renew their driver license and therefore cannot get car insurance.
- 2006        Secure Fence Act  
Result: 700-mile walls/fences are built on the US-Mexico border
- 2006-07    A bipartisan proposal addressing border security, guest worker program & path for legal status went to Congress, but failed to pass
- 2010        Arizona immigration demand to law enforcement officials and law enforcement agencies to make a reasonable attempt to determine the immigration status of a person they come in lawful contact with if they have *reasonable suspicion* that the person lacks lawful status, except if the determination may hinder or obstruct an investigation.  
Application: July 29. Many are worried about an increase in discrimination & profiling, an undermining of public safety by affecting community policing, harm to families and communities, and about the economic impact, given the crucial role that immigrants and Latinos play in Arizona's economy. Other states are considering similar legislation, which is of great concern for the Department of Homeland Security by complicating the process of applying the different state and federal legislations.

### 2. Issues concerning the current realities of immigration

There is a consensus that the current immigration system is broken and in general the concerns center over a few issues:

Social services: many people are worried that immigrants are overwhelming social services, especially emergency at hospitals, and this is costing American taxpayers.

Education system: the influx of immigrant children with low proficiency in English creates a demand for more bilingual education, which of course comes at a cost.

Labor shortage: businesses, especially hotels, restaurants, construction and agriculture industries, are not able to find enough US citizens to fill the demand for jobs in their areas.

Cash economy and low wages: many consider that immigrants keep wages low, and are more accepting of abuse and bad working conditions; in addition most think that immigrants do not pay social security and Medicare taxes.

National security concerns: the terrorists of Sep 11 had all violated immigration laws. There is also the growing problem of human trafficking and drug smuggling through the US-Mexico border.

Militarization of the US-Mexico border: this is shifting the border crossing to more dangerous parts, resulting in more deaths and disabling injuries, more smuggling & human trafficking; there is also a concern about human right abuses in Mexico as well as in the US, lack of due process with detention in unknown places without legal representations. Some think this diverts enforcement and leaves other port of entries vulnerable.

### 3. Facts & Myths

Regarding all the issues mentioned above, let us look at which ones are facts and which ones are myths.

#### Facts

The annual growth of the US population due to immigration is only about one-third of 1% (0.33%). Currently about 11% of the US population is foreign-born, equivalent to 34 millions immigrants (11 % of 307 million).

There are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. 80 % find employment. They represent about 5% of the civilian labor force: 24% of all farming workers, 17% in cleaning, 14% in construction and 12% in food preparation.

Undocumented immigrants are not criminals—they have not broken a criminal law. They have only violated civil law, as we do when we violate a traffic ordinance. Unlawfully crossing U.S. borders is a misdemeanor (like petty theft, public intoxication, disorderly conduct, vandalism, drug possession, reckless driving, DUI or DWI, failing to stop at the scene of an accident, driving without a valid driver's license or without insurance), and if repeated, becomes punishable as a felony (like aggravated assault, arson, burglary, illegal drug use/sales, robbery, murder, rape, repeat DUI/DWI convictions, certain "hit and run" offenses, and vehicular homicide). It is a federal felony to aid, employ and abet an illegal alien. ([www.fairus.org](http://www.fairus.org))

Myths: as a reminder these correspond, as defined by the dictionary, "to fictions or half-truths, especially one that forms part of an ideology". There have been many studies done on immigration and the majority of these studies point out that the following allegations are incorrect.

*Immigrants don't want to learn English.* The development of English proficiency among non-English speaking immigrants today mirrors that of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration, when masses of Italian, German, and Eastern European immigrants came to America. While first generation, non-English speaking immigrants predictably have lower rates of English proficiency than native speakers, 91% of second generation immigrants are fluent or near fluent English speakers. By the third generation, 97% speak English fluently or near fluently. (Pew Hispanic Forum)

*Most immigrants cross the border illegally.* In fact 67-75% of all immigrants have legal permanent (immigrant) visas; of the 25% that are undocumented, 40% overstayed temporary (non-immigrant) visas, as was the case of the terrorists of Sep 11. (Source: Department of Homeland Security)

*Immigrants Don't Pay Taxes.* Legal immigrants pay taxes like any citizen. Illegal immigrants pay taxes in the form of property and sale taxes. Furthermore many pay income taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs), graciously provided by IRS, and some do also pay social security and Medicare taxes put under their forged Social Security numbers. As far as income tax payments go, sources vary in their accounts, but a range of studies find that immigrants in the U.S. pay between \$90 and \$140 billion a year in federal, state, and local taxes. Undocumented immigrants pay income taxes as well, as evidenced by the Social Security Administration's "suspense file" (taxes that cannot be matched to workers' names and social security numbers), which grew by \$20 billion between 1990 and 1998. (Immigration Policy Center, [http://www.immigrationforum.org/about/articles/tax\\_study.htm](http://www.immigrationforum.org/about/articles/tax_study.htm))

*Immigrants come here to take welfare.* Immigrants who are not in the U.S. legally are ineligible for nearly all federal benefits and are eligible only for those that are considered important to public health and safety. Therefore, they can receive very basic kinds of assistance, including: emergency Medicaid, immunizations, testing and treatment for the symptoms of communicable diseases, short-term non-cash disaster relief, school lunches and breakfasts, and certain other programs essential to public health and safety. However, the taxes they pay more than make up for these services. Most undocumented immigrants paying Social Security and Medicare taxes will receive nothing back from them in the future, because of their ineligibility. Even legal immigrants are ineligible for many benefits during their first five years in the United States. (Pew Hispanic Center)

*Immigrants Increase the Crime rate.* Recent research has shown that immigrant communities do not increase the crime rate and that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native born Americans. While the undocumented immigrant population doubled from 1994 to 2005, violent crime dropped by 34% and property crimes decreased by 32%. Furthermore, Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson has found that first generation immigrants are 45% less likely to commit violent crimes than Americanized, third generation immigrants. (Immigration Policy Center)

*Immigrants Take Jobs Away from Americans.* A recent study produced by the Pew Hispanic Center reveals that areas that have seen increases in foreign-born populations have also seen increases in the employment of native born workers. Unemployment in Border States between 1998-2008 remained below the national average despite a decade of high-immigration levels. Working immigrants are mostly filling jobs that would not otherwise be filled. In addition, immigrants create businesses, providing jobs. Unemployment rates for foreign-born Latinos have exceeded that of non-

Hispanic workers during the current recession. (The Urban Institute, Pew Hispanic Center, the American Immigration Law Foundation)

*Immigrants are a drain on the United States Economy.* The immigrant community is not a drain on the U.S. economy but, in fact, proves to be a net benefit. Research reveals that the average immigrant pays a net 80,000 dollars more in taxes than they collect in government services. The American Farm Bureau asserts that without guest workers the U.S. economy would lose as much as \$9 billion a year in agricultural production and 20 percent of current production would go overseas. About one-third of all U.S. job categories would not have been able to expand and may even have contracted due to a lack of workers. (CATO Institute, President's Council of Economic Advisors, Immigration Policy Center)

*Undocumented immigrants are a Burden on the Healthcare System.* Federal, state and local governments spend approximately 1.1 billion dollars annually on healthcare costs for undocumented immigrants, aged 18-64, or approximately \$11 in taxes for each U.S. household. This compares to 88 billion dollars spent on all health care for non-elderly adults in the U.S. in 2000. Foreign born individuals tend to use fewer health care services because they are relatively healthier than their native born counterparts. For example, in Los Angeles County, "total medical spending on undocumented immigrants was \$887 million in 2000 – 6 percent of total costs, although undocumented immigrants comprise 12 percent of the region's residents." (The Rand Corporation)

*Immigrants send all their money back to their home countries.* In addition to the consumer spending of immigrant households, immigrants and their businesses contribute \$162 billion in tax revenue to U.S. federal, state, and local governments. While it is true that immigrants remit billions of dollars a year to their home countries, this is one of the most targeted and effective forms of direct foreign investment. (Cato Institute)

#### 4. Root causes

As the US Catholic Bishops reminded us in their pastoral letter about immigration, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us*: "We must never forget that many immigrants come to this country in desperate circumstances. Some have fled political persecution, war, and economic devastation . . . Others have wagered on finding a better life in this country in the face of economic desperation at home. As Pope John Paul II has noted, 'In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate. . .'. (U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, Nov. 15, 2000)

What are the root causes of immigration?

*Push and pull factors:* the push factor is the poverty and lack of job opportunities in the migrant countries; the pull factor is the demand for cheap labor in the US. Because the current permanent and temporary visas issued per year for low skill workers are insufficient for the labor demand (about 5000), many jobs are filled by undocumented.

*International policies of liberalizing trade and the financial sector:* the so-called free trade agreement that the U.S. and other developed countries are currently pursuing with many developing countries primarily benefits wealthy corporations and wealthy countries; in particular one of the most unjust aspects of the trade system is the use of agricultural subsidies by the U.S. and the EU. As for the financial sector, the recent financial crisis, from which we are still experiencing the consequences, has shown that a free financial market does not auto-regulate and that again the most vulnerable are suffering the most in case of a crisis.

*The Continuing Debt Crisis:* Debt has crippled many developing countries; as precious resources are diverted to debt repayment, millions face poorer and poorer living standards.

*Insufficient Development Aid:* although developed countries have agreed years ago to give 0.7% of their gross national income as official international development aid annually, most are far from reaching this amount, including the US who spent about 0.2% of gross national income in foreign assistance in 2009 (ranked 19 in development aid). Furthermore, aid has often come often with a price tag, under the form of conditions like obligations to buy overpriced goods and services from donor countries.

#### 5. Catholic Teachings

The Catholic Church has long shown concern for the immigrants. Why is this?

*In the Scriptures*

It has its origin in the Scriptures. Both the Old and New Testaments tell compelling stories of refugees forced to flee because of oppression. Exodus tells the story of the Chosen People, Israel, who were victims of bitter slavery in Egypt.

They were utterly helpless by themselves, but with God's powerful intervention they were able to escape and take refuge in the desert. For forty years they lived as wanderers with no homeland of their own. Finally, God fulfilled his ancient promise and settled them on the land that they could finally call home.

The Israelites' experience of living as homeless aliens was so painful and frightening that God ordered his people for all time to have special care for the alien: "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lv 19:33-34).

The New Testament begins with Matthew's story of Joseph and Mary's escape to Egypt with their newborn son, Jesus, because the paranoid and jealous King Herod wanted to kill the infant. Our Savior himself lived as a refugee because his own land was not safe.

Jesus reiterates the Old Testament command to love and care for the stranger, a criterion by which we shall be judged: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35).

The Apostle Paul asserts the absolute equality of all people before God: "There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In Christ, the human race is one before God, equal in dignity and rights.]

### *Keys Themes of the Catholic Social Teaching*

The Catholic Church has developed Catholic Social Teaching to guide us on how to deal with contemporary social issues. They are package in 7 principles and 6 of them can be linked to the immigration issue:

- a) Life and Dignity of the Human Person: all people are created in the image of God, making human life sacred and conferring to the human person a dignity, which should always be respected.
- b) Call to Family, Community and Participation: the family is recognized as the basic cell of the society and governments are responsible for their protection and support.
- c) Rights and Responsibilities of the Human Person: human dignity confers to everyone basic rights to live a decent life and in turn responsibilities to respect other people rights and work for the common good.
- d) Option For and With the Poor and Vulnerable: because of the respect for the life and dignity of the human person, we do have special responsibilities for the weakest in our midst.
- e) Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers: people have the rights to employment and just wage so they can provide to their family as well as right for decent working conditions. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI both reminded us of the priority of the person over profit.
- f) Solidarity: we are all part of the human family and as such our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

## **6. Call for a Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

For several years already the US Bishops recognized the immigration system in the US as broken and have called repetitively for a comprehensive reform, the only way to simultaneously restore both order and human dignity.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have identified these *five principles* that should act as a guide for policymakers in creating immigration reform legislation:

- 1) Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland: "All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need." (Strangers No Longer, USCCB, 2003, #34)
- 2) Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families: "The Church recognizes that all goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right." (Strangers No Longer, USCCB, 2003, #35)
- 3) Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders, but they must also promote the common good: "The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows." (Strangers No Longer, USCCB, 2003, # 36)
- 4) Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection: "Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority." (Strangers No Longer, USCCB, 2003, #37)

- 5) The human rights and the human dignity of undocumented migrants should be respected: “Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity which should be respected. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.” (Strangers No Longer, USCCB, 2003, #38)

The church is calling for the *following elements in the reform*:

- recognizing that the immigration problem will not be resolved without attacking the root cause, the bishops call for continued global anti-poverty efforts, so that immigrants do not have to leave their homes out of necessity;
- in support of families who currently have to wait between 10 to 20 years to be able to reunite, the bishops call for a reduction in the backlogs of the family-based visa system;
- since there is a high demand for unskilled workers in the US economy and the current system only offers 5000 visas for such workers, the bishops call for a temporary worker program that actually provides paths to legal residency for laborers and better protection of their rights;
- looking at the reality of the 12 or so millions undocumented living in the US, the bishops realize that it is not possible to send them all back to their countries and that the only realistic way is an earned path to legalization for the undocumented already here so that they can responsibly take their place in a line that will not take years to process (i.e. not amnesty);
- finally, regarding the respect of human rights, they call for the restoration of due process for immigrants who are here without papers, such as those seeking asylum.

Support for a comprehensive reform exists, in particular by numerous businesses ([www.americansforimmigrationreform.org](http://www.americansforimmigrationreform.org), [www.txsip.org](http://www.txsip.org), [www.immigrationworksusa.org](http://www.immigrationworksusa.org)), some politicians and advocacy groups. The Department of Homeland Security support a federal law because having 50 different state immigration laws will "create chaos and confusion for both immigrants and law enforcement while not fixing the immigration problem at its core."

## 7. What Can You Do

- Learn more about the issue and the church teaching about it by visiting the USCCB website [www.justiceforimmigrants.org/](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/) and reading “*Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*”, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, January 22, 2003 ([www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml))
- Talk about what you have learned to families, friends, colleagues at work, wherever the opportunity arises.
- Advocate for the reform; visit [www.justiceforimmigrants.org/](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/) and [www.txcatholic.org/resources.asp#immigration](http://www.txcatholic.org/resources.asp#immigration) for more info.
- Immigration reform in the US will not solve the root causes of immigration, so it is also important to support international development assistance: the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) have joined forces to confront global poverty. ([www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/), [www.crs.org](http://www.crs.org))

## 8. Prayer

### A Prayer For Immigrant Justice ([www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org))

Blessed are You, Lord God, King of all creation.

Through Your goodness, we live in this land that You have so richly blessed.

Help us always to recognize our Blessings come from You and remind us to share them with others, especially those who come to us today from other lands.

Help us to be generous, just, and welcoming, as You have been and are generous to us.

Loving God, you who hold all people in your compassionate embrace, we pray that our national community may respect the dignity and rights of everyone within our borders.

May our Church guide us in responsible and respectful dialogue on immigration policy.

May we listen carefully to the gospel message and the social teachings of our Church

May we reflect deeply on the call to justice for all.

God, grant us the wisdom to act in love, not in fear.

We pray for all immigrants who seek a better life for themselves and their families.

And we pray for a restoration of memory and hospitality, recalling that the strength of our nation was built upon the contributions, hopes and dreams of immigrants.

Amen