

THINKING OUT LOUD / IMMIGRATION

A Nation That Should Know Better

By Roger Mahony

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It appears fashionable these days, and almost politically correct, to blame hard-working immigrants, especially those from Mexico and Central America, for the social and economic ills of our state and nation. Anti-immigrant fervor on TV and radio talk shows, citizens attempting to enforce immigration laws and the enactment of restrictive laws, such as the Real ID Act, are evidence of this trend. Some of our elected officials are joining the parade, going so far as to call for the closing of our southern border.

This growing hysteria is nothing new: Similar scapegoating has occurred at other troubled times in our nation's history, most prominently against Asian and European immigrants during the late 19th century and during the two world wars of the 20th century. By and large the United States has been able to resist the temptation to close its doors to the world, but not without unjust victimization of "foreigners."

Now we find ourselves in another period of national self-doubt. The war on terrorism has made national security a legitimate concern, and a rising deficit, changes brought on by globalization and even the price of oil have thrown the nation's economic health into question. But as Congress prepares to engage in a debate on immigration reform, we must again resist punishing immigrants for problems that are not of their creation.

Despite the assertions of some, immigrants - including those who are here illegally - are a benefit to this country. They work hard at difficult jobs in important industries. Most analysts would agree that if all the undocumented immigrants in California were deported in one day, our state would experience a severe economic downturn. This does not even consider the many cultural and spiritual gifts these immigrants bring to our state and nation.

To be clear, the church recognizes the right of our country to control its borders, and it does not condone undocumented migration, which serves neither the interest of the migrant nor the respective countries. Immigration should be enforced in a proportional and humane manner.

But the church also does not condone a broken immigration system in the U.S., one that too easily can lead to the exploitation, abuse and even death of immigrants. In this land of opportunity, it is unacceptable that immigrant workers labor in unsafe conditions for wages insufficient to support their families. It is unacceptable that immigrants, including children, are shackled and detained in deplorable conditions. And it is unacceptable that

already this year immigrants have died by the dozens in the California desert or in other parts of the Southwest.

Rather than accept an immoral status quo, our elected officials in Congress should reform, in a comprehensive manner, our legal immigration system. Such reforms should include an opportunity for long-term illegal residents to come out of the shadows - not to be handed amnesty but to work toward permanent residency. They also should feature a temporary-worker program with worker protections that would deal with the many undocumented workers who cross and recross the border. Finally, it should reform the backlogged family reunification system.

Providing a clear route to legal status for longtime residents and providing legal entry to migrants would not only help cure the excesses of a flawed system but ensure that our nation benefits from the contributions of immigrants participating as full members of their communities. Although some in the public square consider any such rule changes a reward for lawbreakers, we should look at the issue holistically and realistically, and understand that the current law is unjust and must be changed.

Legislation recently introduced by Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts offers a blueprint to make these necessary changes. President Bush, who should be commended for placing immigration reform on the national agenda, should work with the bill's sponsors and members of both parties to enact a comprehensive remedy to our broken immigration system.

Our country stands at a critical point in its history. Our heritage as a nation of immigrants is at stake. We should not attack undocumented workers for our broader problems at the same time we accept their talent, toil and taxes. We should not blockade our border at the same time that we depend upon the labor of the immigrant nanny, janitor, busboy and agricultural worker.

As we have in the past, we should embrace our immigrant roots and recognize that newcomers to our land are not part of the problem, they are part of the solution.