

Immigration Reform

[Testimony of Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski, Bishop of Orlando, Florida, before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law on Comprehensive Immigration Reform (May 22, 2007)]

As providers of pastoral and social services to immigrants throughout the nation, we in the Catholic Church witness the human consequences of a broken immigration system every day in our parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools. Families are divided, migrant workers are exploited and abused, and human beings unnecessarily die in the American desert. As a participant in the public debate, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has attempted to point out the human suffering that occurs in our country each day as a result of an immigration system that lacks due process protections and fails to provide the legal status and legal avenues needed to protect immigrants from exploitation.

As a moral matter, the United States cannot employ a system which accepts the toil, taxes, and other contributions undocumented immigrants make to our nation without providing them the protection of the law. I would also add that sending nations have an obligation as well to pursue policies that produce living wage jobs so that their citizens can remain in their country and support their families in dignity.

The Church's work in assisting migrants stems from the belief that every person is created in God's image. In the Old Testament, God calls upon his people to care for the alien because of their own alien experience: "So, you, too, must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:17-19). In the New Testament, the image of the migrant is grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In his own life and work, Jesus identified himself with newcomers and with other marginalized persons in a special way: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Mt. 25:35) Jesus himself was an itinerant preacher without a home of his own as well as a refugee fleeing the terror of Herod. (Mt. 2:15)...

Pope John Paul II stated that there is a need to balance the rights of nations to control their borders with basic human rights, including the right to work: "Interdependence must be transformed into solidarity based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all." ¹ In his pastoral statement, *Ecclesia in America*, John Paul II reaffirms the rights of migrants and their families and the need for respecting human dignity, "even in cases of non-legal immigration."²...

In our recent joint pastoral letter, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops further define Church teaching on migration, calling for nations to work toward a "globalization of solidarity:" "It is now time to harmonize policies on the movement of people, particularly in a way that respects the human dignity of the migrant and recognizes the social consequences of globalization." ³...

[T]he U.S. Catholic bishops believe that any comprehensive immigration reform bill should include 1) an earned legalization program that gives migrant workers and their families the opportunity to obtain permanent residency; 2) a new worker visa program that protects the labor rights of both U.S. and foreign-born workers and gives participants the opportunity to earn permanent residency; 3) reform of the family-based preference system to ensure that families are reunited in a timely fashion; 4) restoration of due process protections for immigrants; and 5) policies that address the root causes of migration, such as the lack of sustainable development in sending countries. We also urge Congress to ensure that provisions are included to facilitate the implementation of any bill in an efficient and fair manner....

It is critical that the Congress and the administration look at the immigration issue with Mexico and other governments as part and parcel of the entire bilateral relationship, including trade and economic considerations. Addressing the immigration systems of both nations, for example, will not control the forces that compel migrants to come to the United States.

In an ideal world for which we must all strive, migrants should have the opportunity to remain in their homelands and support themselves and their families. In this regard, we renew our call to both the U.S. and Mexican governments to resume bilateral migration negotiations so that all issues that impact migration to the United States are addressed...

We are hopeful that, as the House of Representatives debates this issue, neither legal nor undocumented immigrants will be made scapegoats of the challenges we face as a nation. Rhetoric which attacks the human rights and dignity of the migrant does not serve a nation of immigrants; additionally, xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes will only serve to lessen us as a nation. The U.S. bishops are hopeful that this debate will consider not only the negative effects of illegal immigration but also the many benefits that immigrants bring to our communities and our nation.

1 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, (On Social Concern) No. 39.

2 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America (The Church in America)*, January 22, 1999, no. 65.

3 *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 23, 2003, n. 57.