

Archbishop Nienstedt's Message on Immigration

On September 6, 2013, the Minneapolis Star Tribune published a commentary by our Archbishop John C. Nienstedt. We repeat it here for those who may have missed it.

The Catholic Church in Minnesota and, indeed, around the United States, is deeply concerned about our nation's immigration policy. It is inconsistent and ineffective, and it does not promote the common good.

For more than two decades, this country has simultaneously had both a “keep out” and a “help wanted” sign at our borders. Our national policy has been to encourage (and permit) illegal immigration in order to create a new and inexpensive labor source.

We have sent mixed messages to migrant workers and their families. Businesses, farmers, homeowners, and communities rely on immigrants for labor, yet we simultaneously attack them for being here illegally and treat them as scapegoats for various social ills.

Our unjust system risks trampling the dignity of millions of persons simply because they lack the requisite papers. But we cannot and should not tolerate the creation of a permanent underclass forced to live in the shadows of society. And we must respect all persons, regardless of legal status, because they are made in the image and likeness of God – whether or not others find their presence inconvenient.

Therefore, the U. S. Catholic bishops, and millions of Catholics around the country, are calling on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform. We have a moral obligation to provide those who have come here with an opportunity for full citizenship. The time is now.

Catholics see the consequences of a broken system regularly in our parishes, schools, health care institutions and charitable services. Families are divided; people are detained indefinitely in our jails without due process, and children wake up without their parents. People looking for a better life and a way out of dire poverty are exploited: Their wages are stolen or they are sold into slavery.

The U. S. Catholic bishops have highlighted five key principles to assist our nation in moving forward with an acceptable solution that does not undermine national sovereignty or perpetuate injustices to migrant workers.

First, new legislation should reaffirm federal authority and responsibility to enact and implement the nation's immigration laws. **Second**, it must protect and recognize the central importance of family unity as the cornerstone of our immigration system. **Third**, it should establish more functional legal mechanisms for the entry of immigrant workers. **Fourth**, it must create a sound, equitable process toward citizenship for currently undocumented immigrants who desire to embrace the responsibilities and privileges of becoming a U. S. citizen. And, **finally**, it should ensure that our laws are enforced in ways that recognize the importance of due process, the sanctity of the human person, the incomparable value of family and the integrity of our borders.

The bill passed by the U. S. Senate, though flawed in a number of respects, is an important step forward in achieving these goals.

I recognize that this is a complex debate, and many have legitimate concerns about border security, crime, the assimilation of millions of new immigrants and the rule of law. Yet we must always make

sure we are not exaggerating these concerns in ways that deny the basic humanitarian needs of good people seeking refuge in our country.

Further, many concerns are shrouded in myths, and it is important that, as we continue this public debate, the conversation is grounded in fact.

For example, few, if any, deny that it is one of the foremost duties of any sovereign nation to defend its borders and determine its immigration policy. Further, we can all agree that most criminal offenses committed once an individual is in the United States should impede, if not disqualify, one for citizenship. Additionally, the legislation passed in the Senate is hardly a blanket “amnesty,” as even its opponents have acknowledged. One must pay multiple fines and fees, obtain provisional residential status for 10 years, followed by waiting three additional years on green-card status. After proving good moral character, learning English, staying employed and accomplishing a whole host of other requirements, one is finally eligible for citizenship.

Much of the fear and apprehension surrounding this issue points to the fact of finding solutions to the plight of immigrants today will sometimes necessitate the overcoming of boundaries in the heart, not just on the land. Let us open our hearts, arms and communities in this century, as we have in centuries past, to those who seek a better life and the blessing of the bountiful gifts given to all Americans.