



Hear the Immigrants' Cries for Justice

March 22, 2006

As pastoral leaders of the Catholic Church in Florida, we are privileged to witness the vibrant, faith-filled role immigrants play in building up the one universal Body of Christ. Across Florida, the contributions of immigrants in our churches, our schools, our communities and our families are a source of great hope and promise to us all.

We also witness the damage to human dignity and to our common good caused by our nation's broken immigration system. Every day, our pastoral staffs minister to fearful and anxious people, who have been intimidated and frequently defrauded, because of their immigration status. Thousands of our parishioners are separated from immediate family members for years and even decades because of backlogs in the family reunification program.

As Catholics, our faith informs us that each of us has a promise to keep to our immigrant brothers and sisters as well – the promise to work for just immigration policies that promote families and honor human dignity. This is the goal of "Justice for Immigrants: Together on the Journey of Hope" a campaign of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Immigration reform is not merely a political or policy decision. It is a profoundly moral issue. The measure of a just society is how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members. Scripture informs us of the moral imperative to act with justice toward immigrants: "You shall treat the stranger 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 strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lv 19:33-34).

Our 11 million brothers and sisters in Christ living in this country without legal immigration status, including as many as 850,000 in Florida, suffer multiple indignities: divided families, exploitative working conditions, and lives vulnerable to fraud, crime, discrimination and violence. *Let us be clear – we do not endorse illegal immigration.* The current system is profoundly broken, separates families and facilitates exploitation. We need to reform this broken system to create avenues for *legal* immigration, to bring people out of the shadows and enable them to enjoy fully the freedom and individual rights on which this country was founded. We need an earned legalization provision. We will not resolve the current problem with proposals that create an indefinite and temporary status, leading to a permanent second class status.

The common good is a fundamental and permanent principle of our Catholic social teaching. In this situation, the common good requires laws that enable employers and workers to progress. American employers need adequate legal means for hiring manual laborers. A temporary worker program can help employers find adequate labor, so long as it has appropriate limits and safeguards to protect both American and visiting workers. Further, to avoid creating a two-tiered society, with visiting workers who enjoy fewer rights and opportunities than the rest of our community--a condition which harms both those workers and the American-born workers who compete for jobs with them--any temporary worker program should offer a path to permanent residency. We also support changes to the family-based immigration system to reduce the interminable waiting times for family reunification.

We oppose proposals that focus on failed policies, emphasizing enforcement over reform. These policies have proven ineffective at sealing our borders, but they are very effective at punishing poor people who seek a dignified life for their families. We endorse security policies that target the real threats to our peace, rather than pushing further into the shadows the very workers who are strengthening and building our country.

Undocumented status should not be a crime, and bishops, priests, religious sisters, parishioners, and social workers must be able to carry out our faith commitment to our neighbors without fear of breaking the law. Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving.

We ask all Floridians and particularly every Catholic in our state to become informed about the moral imperative for just and comprehensive immigration reform. We urge all people of good will to put aside the myths and misinformation that keep us from hearing our brother and sister immigrants' cries for justice. The campaign website www.justiceforimmigrants.org examines the issues – economic, social and political—and references the texts of Scripture and Catholic social teaching that call each of us to action.

In this season of Lent, we remember our Savior, born into poverty, whose parents were refugees in the land of Egypt, who extolled the good in the Samaritan and the foreigner, who died on the cross for every human person. Each of us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, has a role to play. We call on all Catholics to become informed about these issues by visiting the Justice for Immigrants web site, pray and take action to build the Kingdom of God among us, for all of us, today.

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