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Statement of Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles Chairman, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop's Committee on Migration

This week the U.S. Senate begins a historic debate on immigration reform legislation. It is an important time for our country. The outcome of this debate—and of the one to follow in the House of Representatives—will impact the future of our nation in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The Catholic Church in America has an important stake in the outcome of this debate because we are an immigrant church, and have grown with the country for over two hundred years. Each day in our parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools we witness the human consequences of a broken immigration system. Families are separated, migrant workers are exploited, and our fellow human beings die in the desert. Without positive change to our immigration laws, we cannot help our brothers and sisters. Simply put, the status quo is morally unacceptable. This suffering must end.

Our nation has a stark choice. We can continue on our current path, which employs an immigration system that does not serve the rule of law or the cause of human rights, or we can create a system which honors both principles. We can maintain a system that fosters illegal behavior and undermines the law, or fashion one that provides incentives for legal behavior and is based upon fairness and opportunity.

Our nation must answer several questions.

Do we want a country with a permanent underclass, without the same rights as the majority?

Do we want to continue to separate children from parents, creating a generation of young U.S. citizens who are suspicious and fearful of their government?

Do we want a nation that accepts the toil and taxes of undocumented workers without offering them the protection of the law?

The answer to these questions, of course, is a resounding no.

I encourage our elected officials to move forward and debate immigration reform in a civil and respectful way. The U.S. Catholic bishops are committed to working with them to enact humane immigration reform legislation as soon as possible. In the end, the outcome of this debate will not only affect our nation's future—it will impact our soul. Thank you.