

Immigration reform can wait no longer

(Published by Today's Catholic, August 14, 2009)

Most Reverend José H. Gomez

Archbishop of San Antonio

The current Congress, which just recessed until September, certainly has its hands full trying to deal with the economic crisis and struggling with health-care reform.

Nevertheless, both issues, and many others, must not be an excuse to address the urgent need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform. This is a matter that needs immediate resolution because of its magnitude and importance to the fabric of our society.

I have to say that this issue is deeply personal for me. I am both an American citizen and an immigrant, born and raised in Monterrey, Mexico. Some of my ancestors were in what's now Texas, since the early 1800's and I've always had family and friends on both sides of the border. So I have many conflicting emotions about the way this debate has played out in recent years.

However, I am not impelled to urge our politicians to find a definitive solution to the immigration by these personal reasons.

I am driven by the fact that Catholics must be true witnesses to the generous love of Christ, even when our passions compel us in another direction, and to see the spiritual, emotional, social, and economic deterioration that the current legal limbo is causing not only for immigrants and their families, but to our entire nation.

On June 18, at the spring meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) held here in San Antonio, Cardinal Francis George summarized both the feeling of all bishops and the logic that strongly motivates us to call for immigration reform before the end of the year.

The President of the USCCB explained in fact that "it has been clear for years that the United States immigration system requires repair and that reform legislation should not be delayed."

As bishops, the Cardinal explained, "we urge respect and observance of all just laws, and we do not approve or encourage the illegal entry of anyone into our country. From a humanitarian perspective, however, our fellow human beings, who migrate to support their families, continue to suffer at the hands of immigration policies that separate them from family members and drive them into remote parts of the American desert, sometimes to their deaths. This suffering should not continue."

We bishops are not politicians, we are pastors of souls. And as pastors, we believe that the current immigration situation is profoundly harmful to the soul of our country.

After the failure of the proposed immigration reform in 2007 we need a reform that will confront the issue in all its complexity that will reconcile the parties and overcome extreme positions.

As Cardinal George said in his petition sent to President Barack Obama and Congress, "our society should no longer tolerate a status quo that perpetuates a permanent underclass of persons and benefits from their labor without offering them legal protections. As a moral matter, we must

resolve the legal status of those who are here without proper documentation so that they can fully contribute their talents to our nation's economic, social and spiritual well being.”

The Church has an important role to play in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation on this issue. We must work so that justice and mercy, not anger and resentment, are the motives behind our response to illegal immigration.

We know, in fact, that millions of immigrants are here in violation of U.S. law. This makes law-abiding Americans angry. And it should. Those who violate our laws have to be punished. But, what punishments are proper and just? I think, from a moral standpoint, we're forced to conclude that deporting immigrants who break our laws is too severe a penalty. It's a punishment that's disproportionate to the crime.

Deportations are breaking up families, leaving wives without husbands, children without parents. That is not a situation that Catholics should want. The family is central not only to our faith, but to our society.

That is why I want to again propose an idea that I presented in my address to the Missouri Catholic Conference last October, and which I believe could offer an alternative that would serve both charity and justice.

We have to insist that those who come to our country respect our laws. If they are here illegally, they can't expect to escape punishment. But I would suggest that some kind of community service would be a far more constructive solution than deportation. This would build communities rather than tear them apart. And it would serve to better integrate the immigrants into the social and moral fabric of America.

This may or may not be the solution. But with it, I want to point out that, with courage and creativity, it is possible for our politicians to find a just and honorable solution that creates equal justice for the two great traditions in this country: compassion for the defenseless and respect for the law.

As I have said before, I believe that this is the greatest civil rights test of our generation. The lives of millions of undocumented workers and their families hang in the balance. Millions are presently forced by our failed policies to live without rights at the margins of this great country

With all my heart, I ask Catholics and people of good will to encourage our elected officials, with our prayers and our actions, to propose comprehensive immigration reform before the end of this year.