

Labor Day Statement

A Labor Day Reflection on Immigration and Work

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September 4, 2006

Each year as summer draws to a close many of us gather on Labor Day with family, friends and neighbors to take a rest from our work. As a nation, we set this day aside to pay tribute to the workers who create our nation's wealth and strength. Our Catholic faith reminds us of the inherent dignity and value of our work, through which, no matter how large or small the task, we participate in God's creation, support our families, and contribute to the common good. Each Labor Day we celebrate and share our values on work and workers and remember the importance and the contributions of the labor movement to society.

Labor Day 2006 is a time when our nation and our church are struggling with the difficult and important issue of immigration. Men, women and children come here seeking work and a better life for their families, hoping to be welcomed as neighbors and contributors to our communities. They come as skilled and unskilled workers, agricultural laborers, or to study or join family already here. They come, in part, because U.S. employers need their labor and our economy depends upon them. Many come through official legal channels. Many others do not.

These realities and our inadequate immigration system have led to a necessary, but sadly divisive, debate on how our nation should respond. Unfortunately, the debate sometimes has not brought out the best in us. People of good will can and do disagree over how to improve our immigration laws. Regrettably, this disagreement sometimes disintegrates into polarization, partisanship and now paralysis. We

must get beyond the anger and fear, stereotypes and slogans that too often dominate this essential discussion.

Immigration is not a new reality. We are a nation and a Church built by immigrants. However, immigration raises continuing questions with new urgency. Who is an American? Who is our "neighbor?" What are the impacts of immigration on our national economy? How much is too much—or not enough—immigration? How are individual workers and families affected—both native born workers and those newly arrived? How are we to address the reality that over 10 million people are here without legal documentation, but, with few exceptions, leading lives that share our values of work, family and community? How can we stand with some American workers who feel left behind or pushed aside? How are we to protect our borders against those who would do us harm?

We all bring our own perspectives, biases, even prejudices to this discussion. I hope as we approach Labor Day, each of us might try to see these difficult questions through the eyes and experiences of someone very different from ourselves:

- a father in Mexico who cannot feed his family, or a rancher on the border whose land has become a dangerous path for desperate people, threatening their lives and his livelihood
- a worker without legal status cutting meat or picking fruit, or a U.S. worker, with little

education and few skills, searching for a job at a decent wage

- a farmer or business owner who can't find enough workers, or a union leader working for exploited and unrepresented workers
- a border guard asked to do an impossible task with limited resources, or a legislator who has the difficult responsibility of trying to reconcile these very different perspectives in pursuit of the common good.

My convictions are shaped by my own history as a grandson of Italian immigrants, and now a bishop and pastor in Brooklyn, one of the most diverse and vibrant dioceses in our Church. I have also served as director of the U.S. bishops' Office of Migration and Refugee Services. I have seen the daily struggles and dreams of immigrants in my diocese and throughout the country. I understand their desire, shared by my grandparents, to give their children a better life. That is why I believe we must and we can find reasonable and responsible ways to welcome those seeking a new life and opportunity. I believe we can help newcomers without legal status to come out from the shadows and contribute more fully to our communities. When we do this, I believe we can also increase the security of our nation and the vitality of our Church.

The Catholic Church has a long history of involvement with immigrants. Our experience in working with immigrants throughout the years compels us to speak out on the issue of immigration reform, a moral issue which impacts human rights, human life and human dignity. The Church's mission in assisting and standing with immigrants flows from our belief that every person is created in God's image. Indeed, in His own life and work, Jesus called upon us to "welcome the stranger," for "what you do for the least of my brethren, you do unto me." (Mt. cf. 25: 35, 40). This is why the Catholic community has a broad and growing Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform that we hope will contribute to a constructive debate on immigration.

(<http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org>)

Immigration touches many aspects of national life, but in this Labor Day statement, I want to focus on those aspects that touch on work. The challenge of immigration today is not just at the borders, but in our labor markets. Right now, more than 12% of U.S. residents and some 15% of workers were born in another country, up from about 5% in 1960. Recent census data reveals that many newcomers are settling in parts of the country that until recently saw little immigrant activity—regions like the South, Upper Midwest, New England and the Rocky Mountain States. As this happens, newcomers can find themselves linguistically and culturally isolated and more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination because of their legal status and language barriers. And local communities can feel overwhelmed by the growing presence of people in their midst with different languages and different ways.

The simple fact is many parts of our nation's economy have become dependent on immigrant workers. Agriculture relies heavily on seasonal workers to pick our crops. Our fruits and vegetables cannot be harvested without the backbreaking work of farmworkers. Immigrant workers are increasingly moving from fields to factories: working in meat and poultry processing plants, and large hog and cattle operations. The poultry industry, increasingly industrialized and offering some of the highest risk jobs in the U.S., has a low-paid workforce that is nearly half immigrant. Our country's hotel and restaurant industries to a great extent rely on foreign born workers; they bus the tables, make the beds and clean up after us. The fact is we have come to depend more and more on international migration to fill our workforce. Without them our economy would have huge gaps.

Our immigration laws have failed to keep up with the demand for labor, so the need is filled by those who come into the country without legal sanction. Over 80% of those who have come here illegally are working part-time or full-time, contributing to the common good of our

country through the work they perform and the taxes they pay.

I believe most Americans recognize the need for comprehensive reform of our fundamentally flawed U.S. immigration system. Some call for strictly limiting admission to the country as the only way to protect American workers. It is true that many newcomers may do difficult work at very low wages. But according to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center, it appears that overall increases in immigration do not result in increases in unemployment among native born workers.

What draws so many to our country? Many immigrants come because they want to live out the values we celebrate this Labor Day—hard work, providing a decent living for one’s family, contributing to the community, a life of dignity and opportunity gained through hard work.

These are also values of our faith. Catholic teaching on work insists that human beings share in God’s creation through their work. In Catholic social teaching, work is for the person, not the person for work. Work is the ordinary means by which individuals support themselves and their families and contribute to the common good. Catholic teaching supports the right of workers to decent and fair wages, health care, and time off. This is why our bishops’ Conference has traditionally supported the minimum wage and why we urge, once again, that our leaders move beyond their current partisan and ideological conflicts to enact a long over due increase in the minimum wage. Workers, also have a right to organize to protect their rights, to have a voice in the workplace and to be represented by trade unions. These basic human and economic rights are not invalidated or relinquished when one crosses a border.

The increasing international movement of goods, services, money, and people require new economic norms, ethical restraints and wise laws to regulate and address their moral and human dimensions. We need to recognize that growing globalization brings with it benefits, lost jobs, falling living standards, and inhumane working

conditions. A role of the Church, as a universal community of faith and an international institution, is to raise up the dignity and value of workers. That is why the U.S. bishops support policies that will help people to remain in their own countries, as well as policies to address the impact of immigration in our own nation.

Men and women come to America because they cannot find in their own countries the economic, political and social conditions they need to support their families, live in dignity and achieve a decent life. The bishops and others are working to develop and advocate policies on global trade, international aid and debt relief that will reduce poverty and empower the poor, foster long-term economic development, protect human dignity in underdeveloped nations, and includes effective protections for workers in the U.S. and other countries. People should be able to provide a decent life for their families in their own countries.

Still, people come from all over the world seeking opportunity in the United States, and many come outside of the structures of our immigration laws. While the Church does not condone law-breaking, their presence here is a reality. We know their names and faces; they are in our parishes, schools and Catholic Charities agencies. That is why a comprehensive approach to immigration reform must include a pathway to earned legalization for the millions of those working in our country without legal status. Justice and prudence demand that we treat them with dignity and find a reasonable way for their contributions and presence to be recognized within the law.

Our Conference has also come to support a carefully designed and closely monitored, temporary worker program that ensures workers are not exploited and protects the rights of both foreign-born and U.S. workers. *Everyone* working in our country should have a safe workplace, wages and employment benefits to support their families, and the protection of our labor laws, including the right to organize and have a voice. Free trade unions have long played an essential and important role in protecting

workers' dignity and rights. We welcome the newly announced AFL-CIO partnership with day laborers. The labor movement's effort to bring order and recognition to street corners inhabited by men, mostly immigrants, seeking a day's work is an important step forward.

For the Catholic Church, immigration is not a political issue, but a fundamental human and moral issue. We bring to this discussion our faith, our moral principles and our long experience. Through the decades, immigrants have built our communities of faith and they are still bringing new life to our church. Immigrants are not numbers for us. They are our brothers and sisters; they are our "neighbors."

In his powerful encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that Jesus calls us to expand who we see as our neighbor. The Holy Father, citing the parable of the Good Samaritan, says that "neighbor" can no longer be limited to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. ... 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God. (para. 15).

Who is our neighbor is not dependent on where they were born or what documents they possess.

The immigration debate this Labor Day challenges us to consider again who we are as a nation, how our economy treats all workers, how we welcome the "strangers" among us. As Catholics, we should join this discussion and bring our belief in the sacredness of human life, the inherent dignity of the human person and the value of work. We cannot simply retreat behind walls at our borders or in our hearts and minds. As believers, we are called to build bridges between the native born and newcomer, between legitimate concerns about security and national traditions of welcome, from fear and frustration to hope and action for a better tomorrow.

Today, and years ago when my grandparents came from Italy, immigration is a human story of people yearning for work and longing for freedom. Immigrants come seeking to provide a decent living for their families, dreaming of a better life for their children, hoping to make a contribution. These are the deeply held American values we celebrate on Labor Day. The principles of our faith and the traditions of our nation call us to welcome those who share these values and hopes. They add vitality and energy, diversity and hope to our communities and our country. Together, we can build a better nation, a stronger economy and a more faithful Church.