

## OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

I was shocked. Finally someone said it loud and clear: “Immigration is the greatest civil rights test of our generation...It is very close to the right to life.” And he said it with the authority that, in the Church, comes with the teaching office. It happened at a meeting of the Missouri Catholic Conference where Archbishop José Gomez of San Antonio, Texas, delivered a speech on continuing to fight for comprehensive immigration reform as soon as the new president and congress are sworn in.

What was surprising was not so much the “civil rights test” portion of the message—around which the Justice for Immigrants campaign of the U.S. Catholic Bishops has been building awareness for a few years now—but the fact that he put this issue right up there with the right to life. And he is right, migration, whichever form it takes, is always about the right to life. Whether immigrants flee political or religious persecution, mass genocide or hunger and poverty, their human spirit of survival and the sense of responsibility to take care of your own, even if it comes at the price of never seeing them again, is all about seeking life, preserving life and improving life. It is about the right to exist and to do so in dignified human conditions.

I am not going to summarize here the archbishop’s talk. I think it should be read in its entirety (a copy can be obtained at [www.originsonline.com](http://www.originsonline.com)).

Over the years I’ve been moved when hearing the compelling reasons why most people emigrate. I was at one point an immigrant myself. It has little to do with a sense of adventure. And yes, ideally, people ought to emigrate legally. But what happens when the “come-here-legally” window is practically closed for business but a big colorful sign that reads “help wanted (lots of it!)” sits right next to it suggesting a crack in the wall? That is what has been happening for decades with our immigration laws, which have proven inadequate to our labor needs, and trade policies that liberalized the movement of merchandise across borders but not the movement of labor.

Restrictionist policies fence people in. They have led to millions of people living in the shadows of our society, and have left employers, as we say in Spanish, *entre la espada y la pared* (between the sword and the wall) . While I lived in Colorado I met farmers, fast food restaurant and construction company owners who struggled after failing to interest enough nationals to work in their trade (some of them were offering more than a decent wage) and were

not able to obtain enough visas for foreign workers. The current system was clearly not working for them. The dilemma was to let their crops rot, go into a mere economy of survival, close their businesses and cut off the livelihood of their families, or hire the plentiful immigrant labor at hand, even if illegally.

Clearly our immigrant program is in shambles. Responsible reform offers hope for individuals and our nation. I will feel more secure, and our nation will benefit from, knowing the actual composition of its work force and social fabric. An increase of several million taxpayers almost over night won't be bad medicine for our ailing treasury either. Turning anonymous people into law abiding citizens could benefit the country as a whole.

We are a no-nonsense nation, but on this issue of illegal immigration I have heard enough nonsense already. Don't expect Catholics to be silent about it anymore.

Comprehensive immigration reform now! Yes we can! Sounds familiar?