

Bishop Urges Focus on Biblical Roots of Catholic Immigration Position

By Jim Myers

www.catholicnews.com

May 22, 2009

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (CNS) -- U.S. Catholics have a difficult time accepting church teaching about just immigration laws, said Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto, chairman of the board of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, known as CLINIC.

He urged Catholics to look to the Bible to better understand the church's teaching on immigration and its long-standing support for the rights of immigrants.

In an interview with the Colorado Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Colorado Springs Diocese, he also said that current immigration laws have unintended consequences that are detrimental to public safety and economic development.

"The irony of tough immigrant enforcement on the border is that it compels many people to stay in the country when they might otherwise return home," he said while he was in town for the annual convening of CLINIC May 20-22. "The putative immigrant enforcement has had the counterintuitive response of actually contributing to the increased size of the undocumented population."

The meeting came as advocates for immigration reform were gearing up for a White House-congressional strategy meeting on immigration, and as bills addressing some immigration issues were pending in Congress.

Bishop Soto encouraged the attorneys, advocates and social workers attending the conference to keep an eye on the church's greater mission in society.

"I think we have to realize we are part of a long and strong and bold history," he said at the opening plenary session May 20. "We have to remain certain, particularly given the strength of CLINIC, we will respond in as vigorous and as faithful a way as previous generations have done."

Bishop Soto said despite its long tradition of supporting the rights of immigrants, the Catholic Church is no different from the general U.S. population in having tension between the native-born and immigrants.

"I think many Catholics have trouble with the church's broad and comprehensive moral traditions," he said. "We see that in California with issues on abortion ... (and) with recent Prop 8 work to support traditional marriage. And we see it in immigration, where many American Catholics do not understand the Gospel mandates."

His reference to "Prop 8," which the Catholic Church supported, was about the voter-approved Proposition 8 to amend the California state constitution to define marriage as being between one man and one woman.

The initiative was put on the 2008 ballot after the California Supreme Court ruled the state's ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional in May 2008. Despite its passage the state Supreme Court is currently reviewing the ballot initiative to determine if it is constitutional.

Bishop Soto said "many Catholics fail to see the gospel vision that it is not only the moral thing to do, but that it also serves the common good. ... We're hoping to contribute to building a better society."

He told the Herald that the failure of the current immigration system is a societal issue that creates economic and legal stress for immigrants and native-born alike and that comprehensive immigration reform will benefit the country as a whole.

"Immigration reform will help to unleash the economic and industrial potential of this community and create, I believe, a win-win," said Bishop Soto. "Immigration reform is not just for immigrants; it's for American society. We become a better community, a more prosperous community and a safer community through immigration reform."

CLINIC convened as advocates for comprehensive reform were gearing up for the June 8 immigration strategy session at the White House with members of Congress and the anticipated congressional debate this summer on several types of legislation.

Two bills that have long had bipartisan support but have failed to pass out of Congress several times are awaiting action again this term.

Rep. Howard Berman, D-Calif., May 14 reintroduced the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits, and Security Act of 2009, known as AgJOBS, which would create an "earned legalization" program allowing certain undocumented farmworkers and guest workers to earn temporary legal immigration status with the chance to become permanent residents by meeting certain requirements and continuing to work in agriculture.

As of May 22, the bill had 27 co-sponsors of both parties, though no committee action had been scheduled. No Senate version had yet been introduced.

Earlier in the spring, in the House and Senate lawmakers reintroduced versions of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, known as the DREAM Act. The bill would provide a path for undocumented students who were brought to the United States as children to legalize their status while attending college or serving in the military.

In an April 3 letter to Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., chairman of the immigration subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City urged passage of the bill as soon as possible.

"Those who would benefit from the DREAM Act are talented, intelligent and dedicated young persons who know only the United States as their home," said the letter from Bishop Wester, chairman of the bishops' migration committee. "They can become the future leaders of our country, provided we are wise enough to provide them the opportunity to pursue their dreams."

"Copyright © 2009 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The CNS news report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or otherwise distributed, including but not limited to such means as framing or any other digital copying or distribution method, in whole or in part without the prior written authority of Catholic News Service."