



# Issues

Office of Peace and Social Justice  
Diocese of Gary

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## Immigration Reform

You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves

Exodus 22:20

‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me...’. The righteous will answer him (the Lord), ‘And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.’

Matthew 25:35-40

On September 24, 2005, the Diocese of Gary celebrated the Year of the Eucharist with a liturgy, informative speakers and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The late Pope John Paul II hoped that proclaiming the Year of the Eucharist would lead the Church to be renewed by rediscovering “a particular way to respond with fraternal solicitude to one of the many forms of poverty present in our world.” *Stay With Us, Lord*, October 7, 2005

Last Spring, the bishops of the United States launched a campaign that focused on four life issues in our world: the death penalty; immigration reform; poverty here and world-wide; peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Each is linked to Eucharist, which we really celebrate only when we hear God’s word, eat and drink his Son’s body and blood, realizing we are the Body of Christ both in church and outside it, and commit to helping the suffering part of the Body in prison, as strangers, poor, and struggling for peace.

It is estimated there are 25 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the



Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to  
me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

United States. While many perceive the public faces of immigrants are Mexican, the fact is undocumented immigrants come from all over—Ireland, Russia, East India, China, Haiti, Poland, etc. Some come seeking political refuge, but the majority want work and a better life for themselves and their families—not much different than immigrants in past years. They live in the shadows, taking jobs that Americans do not want because the pay is poor, and the work is demanding or dangerous.

Because they have no documents, they have no rights. There have been cases where immigrants have worked and not been paid because they had no documents. Some employers bring undocumented immigrants to work in virtual slavery with housing provided and a debt to the employer that they can never pay. Female immigrants are sometimes told the job is housekeeping, but it really is prostitution and they are trapped by human traffickers.

The immigration laws in this country are a mass of rules that separate families and raise the cost of

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gaining legal status with seemingly arbitrary standards.

The U.S. Bishops have called for immigration reform. The President and the House of Representatives have translated that into a bill proposing a wall be built all along the U.S. and Mexican border. They also propose to criminalize immigrants and those who help them (lawyers, nurses, doctors, priests, church workers, etc.), to make it more difficult to seek political refuge. The House bill does not contain the President's very limited guest worker program. The Senate will take up the House bill in February, and some sort of guest worker program may be added.



In their call for immigration reform, the bishops provide the perspective and principles Catholics need to measure that reform. In 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (the Mexican Episcopal Conference) issued a joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. The bishops link their letter to Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*. Issued in 1999, the pope called on the churches of North, Central and South America to understand themselves in solidarity, in a common encounter with the living Jesus Christ, needing conversion and seeking communion together to address migration, evangelization, poverty, globalization, debt, drugs, and a variety of cultural and social questions. The pope maintained that migrants have rights, must be treated with dignity and respect, and welcomed with hospitality.

In their letter, the bishops give a brief history of migration between the United States and Mexico, and ground their reflections in the Old and New Testament, citing the befriending of the alien as a key to understanding the God of Israel, and Matthew's Last Judgement with its norm of seeing the treatment of the least ones (hungry, naked, stranger, sick, etc.) as treatment of the Lord Jesus. They turn to Catholic social teaching, and find in the teachings of past popes Leo XIII, Pius XII, John XXIII and John Paul II, defense of the right to conditions worthy of human life and the right to migrate if those conditions are not present. John XXIII spoke of the right not to have to

migrate. John Paul II paid attention not only to migrants and their rights, but to refugees and those seeking asylum. From Scripture, Catholic social teaching, especially that of John Paul II, and their own reflections and pastoral experience, the bishops identified five principles that should guide the Church's view of migrant issues—

1. People have the right to find opportunities in their homeland. Everyone has the right to find in their own country the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and to use their God-given talents. One of these opportunities is work with a just, living wage based on human need.
2. People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. The Church recognizes in the teaching of Paul VI, that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. People have a right to find work elsewhere when they cannot find work to support themselves and their families in their home country. Nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.
3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. The Church recognizes that right, but it rejects such control when used simply to acquire additional wealth. Nations which are more powerful economically and have the ability to provide for their residents, have a strong obligation to accommodate migration flows.
4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those fleeing from war and/or persecution should be protected by the global community. At minimum, migrants have the right to claim refugee status without being imprisoned, and to have their claims fully judged by competent officials.
5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected. All human beings, regardless of their legal status, have inherent dignity and that should be respected. Government policies must respect basic human rights.

These principles are rooted in Scripture and the Church's social teaching, and remain valid regardless of the migration question or circumstance. The

bishops move from the principles to focus on specific public policy challenges for the governments of the United States and Mexico. These challenges are helpful for migration concerns of the United States and a host of other countries.

One of the root causes of migration is the economic inequality between nations. The Church has consistently said global disorder needs to be addressed. While the bishops point out the harmful effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on small businesses in Mexico, especially in rural areas, they also note Mexico's need to target projects that will help agriculture and small businesses. One of the issues to reflect on in the immigration reform debate is the relationship between national economies and the need to build strong economies in which work is available that pays a just, living wage.

The bishops apply the principles to specific migration issues between the United States and Mexico. They call for a family-based immigration policy that, unlike current U.S. immigration law, would unite families, particularly the nuclear family—father, mother, and children.

A broad legalization program is suggested for the undocumented from many nations who are working in the United States. The bishops suggest an employment-based immigration policy that would feature a system for both permanent and temporary employment with appropriate visas available. Such a policy requires cooperation between the United State and Mexico to work out issues like Social Security benefits, protection of U.S. workers, rights of permanent and temporary workers, visa requirements, etc.

The bishops touch on immigration enforcement strategies and border enforcement issues, noting that while U.S. enforcement strategies have grown harsher, they have not deterred migrants. Both countries need to look at their enforcement strategies, respect human rights and educate and train immigration enforcement personnel to be sensitive in their handling of undocumented migrants. While affirming the right of a

sovereign nation to control its borders, the bishops point to the need for both the U.S. and Mexican authorities to avoid abuse of migrants and to abandon the type of border enforcement strategies that give rise to migrant smuggling operations and migrant deaths.

Finally, the bishops criticize the asylum policies of both countries for denying asylum seekers appropriate judicial remedies and protection. The U.S. policy on the Mexican border of expedited removal is often applied, detaining migrants and deporting them without a hearing.

In October 2005, the USCCB with 37 other national religious organizations endorsed an interfaith statement that called for comprehensive immigrant reform that would “establish a safe and human immigration system.” The bishops, citing passages from the Old and New Testament and the Koran, draw the attention of the lawmakers to the “moral dimension of public policy,” and urge them to “pursue policies that uphold the human dignity of each person.” In addition, some 70 local religious organizations, including Heartland Center/Office of Peace and Social Justice of the Diocese of Gary, and numerous individual religious leaders have endorsed the interfaith statement.

The statement calls for the opportunity for hard-working immigrants to come out of the shadows, regularize their status upon satisfaction of reasonable criteria, and eventually move to U.S. citizenship. It urges reform of the family-based immigration system to reduce the waiting period and develop criteria to enter the U.S. as workers with their families in a safe, legal, orderly manner. It calls for border protection policies that are consistent with humanitarian values while allowing authorities to carry out the critical task of identifying and preventing entry of terrorists and dangerous criminals.

Unfortunately, the bipartisan legislation for immigration reform and a guest worker program failed in Congress. The House of Representatives bill passed this January, H.R. 4437, does not meet any of the principles of Catholic social teachings, and



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was opposed by the bishops and all signatories of the Interfaith Statement. As Cardinal Justin Rigali notes, among other things, this bill subjects humanitarian workers, including Church workers, to five years in prison simply for providing basic needs assistance, such as food and water, to undocumented immigrants (cf. Matthew 25: 31-46, the Final Judgement).

The Cardinal goes on to say, “I urge Senator Specter and the U.S. Senate to reject H.R. 4437 and adopt a more comprehensive and human approach to immigration reform. I also urge Catholics and others of good will to support this approach. Our nation stands at a critical juncture in its history. Before venturing down the path of exclusion and intolerance, we must remember that all of us, except for American Indians, are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Together, we can create an immigration system that reflects our national values, promotes our national security and is worthy of our great nation, a nation of immigrants.”

## **Suggested action**

- Support and get involved with the Diocesan Migrant Ministry. If your parish is not involved in this ministry, contact Adeline Torres at the Hispanic Ministries Office, 219.397.2125, [atorres@dcgary.org](mailto:atorres@dcgary.org)
- Seek more information on this issue. Read the bishops’ letter, *Strangers No Longer*.
- Both Representatives Visclosky and Chocola voted for H.R. 4437. Hold them accountable.
- Via the ICC network, Heartland Center/The Office of Peace & Social Justice will provide updates on immigration legislation especially when there is a bill before the Senate. At that time Senators Lugar and Bayh and perhaps others will need to be contacted. To be added to the ICC network, call 219.844.7515

✝James M. Dixon, S.J.

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