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Immigration reform next up on bishops' wish list for Congress

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Over the years, hundreds of thousands of postcards have come from U.S. Catholics in organized efforts to influence members of Congress on issues ranging from partial-birth abortion to human cloning to health care reform.

A new postcard campaign in 2010 will urge Congress to take up as its next priority comprehensive immigration reform that would reunite families, regularize the status of an estimated 12 million people in this country illegally and restore due process protections for immigrants.

"We want to increase Catholic grass-roots support for immigration reform, but we also want to show members of Congress a strong Catholic voice and strong Catholic numbers in support of immigration reform," said Antonio Cube, national manager of the U.S. bishops' Justice for Immigrants project, in a Nov. 16 conference call with reporters.

The postcard campaign will coincide in most places with the bishops' National Migration Week, Jan. 3-9, although it might be held earlier or later in some dioceses, Cube said. It also is part of a multifaceted interfaith campaign called "Home for the Holidays," designed to stress the family reunification aspect of immigration reform.

The Catholic Church is uniquely situated to comment on the immigration issue, because of its "long history of welcoming and serving immigrants for generations" and because it is "present in both the sending countries as well as the receiving countries," Cube said.

Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, predicted in a Nov. 17 interview with Catholic News Service that the prospects for Congress to pass immigration legislation will depend a great deal on how health care reform fares in the coming weeks.

If health care reform fails to pass, Bishop Wester told CNS at the U.S. bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore, it will mean the political parties are so divided that the chance of passing immigration reform will be greatly diminished.

However, success with health care legislation will bode well for an immigration bill, he said: "That will mean there's a momentum in the country."

President Barack Obama has promised repeatedly that immigration reform would be the next big issue on the administration's domestic agenda.

At a Nov. 13 press conference, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, whose agencies handle most immigration-related law and policies, said the political climate, economy, border security issues and immigrant flows have all changed since the last attempt

to pass an immigration bill in 2007, making the goal more attainable now.

"I've been dealing hands-on with immigration issues since 1993," said the former Arizona governor. "So trust me, I know a major shift when I see one, and what I have seen makes reform far more attainable this time around."

She cited improved border security, with particular attention to stopping smuggled cash and weapons on which drug cartels thrive, as well as fewer illegal entries to the United States, partly because of improved enforcement and partly because of the poor economy.

Napolitano outlined an immigration reform package that echoes the comprehensive approach long advocated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, other religious and immigrant rights organizations. She also came out strongly in favor of offering a way for the millions of undocumented immigrants to legalize their status.

"We will never have a fully effective law enforcement or national security system as long as so many millions remain in the shadows," she said.

Bishop Wester said he's confident that his fellow bishops are ready and willing to work to help pass a comprehensive reform bill.

"The bishops know the stories, they see the people, the human faces," he said. One of the biggest problems with previous attempts to pass immigration reform, said Bishop Wester, was that the "loud, strident voices" opposed to reform caused many members of Congress to hesitate to support legislation.

"We were outperformed 10-to-1 in terms of media," said the bishop.

He said the bishops' coming postcard campaign, as well as plans to use community-based networks such as Facebook and Twitter to remind members of Congress of the level of support for reform, will help offset those opponents.

Other denominations will be organizing their congregations in similar ways, especially in seven states whose members of Congress are considered critical to the immigration reform debate -- Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Arkansas, Missouri, South Carolina and North Carolina.

The Rev. David Vasquez is campus pastor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, about 20 minutes from the scene of one of the nation's largest immigration raids -- the May 12, 2008, raid at the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville. Nearly 400 people were arrested that day -- equal to about 15 percent of Postville's population.

"While we fail to reform our broken immigration system, 442,000 people will be detained this year by Immigration (and Customs Enforcement), wreaking havoc on communities and families across the country," said Rev. Vasquez in the conference call. "This is the equivalent of 1,000 Postville raids."

The Rev. Dean Reed, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Stephenville, Texas, said

healing broken communities is a religious imperative.

"The immigration system has created problems and opened the door to divisive rhetoric," he said. "We need to reform the system so these problems can be humanely and fairly solved, and our sense of community restored."

Jews too have a religious obligation "to welcome the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt," said Vic Rosenthal, executive director of Jewish Community Action in St. Paul, Minn.

"This commandment from the Torah combined with our history of immigration throughout the world leads us to stand in solidarity with immigrants of today struggling to secure legal status," he said.

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