The Immigration Debate: What the Bishops Say

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The Immigration Debate

What the Bishops Say

In a landmark pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States acknowledged that the current immigration system is badly in need of reform and that a comprehensive approach is required to fix it.

The bishops offered a comprehensive set of recommendations for changes which reflect the principles contained in Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching, and to bring about a more humane and just immigration system in the United States.

The bishops’ call for reforms included the following elements:

**Global anti-poverty efforts**

Many migrants are compelled to leave their homes out of economic necessity in order to provide even the most basic of needs for themselves and their families. The bishops called for international efforts designed to create conditions in which people do not have to leave their homes out of necessity. The bishops said trade, international economic aid, debt relief, and other types of economic policies should be pursued that result in people not having to migrate in desperation in order to survive.

**Opportunities to reunify families**

Immigrants who are now U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents endure many years of separation from close family members who want to join them in the United States. The backlog of visas for family members means that many wait five, ten, fifteen, and more years for a visa to become available. The bishops called for a reduction of the pending backlog and more visas available for family reunification purposes.

**Temporary worker program**

The U.S. economy depends upon the labor provided by immigrants; therefore, many come to the United States to fill jobs. The bishops acknowledged this reality and called for a more rationale and humane system by which laborers from other countries can enter the U.S. legally in order to fill positions in the labor force, including on a temporary basis.

The bishops called for a temporary worker program which would:

- include a reasonable and verifiable process for obtaining permanent legal residency;
- promote family unity by allowing immediate family members to join workers and obtain work authorization;
- allow mobility within the U.S. and between the U.S. and the worker’s homeland;
- provide job portability, which allows workers to change employers;
- provide labor protections which apply to U.S. workers;
- include enforcement mechanisms to protect worker’s rights, including the right to bring action in federal court;
- insure wages and benefits which do not undercut domestic workers;
- require a labor-market test to ensure that U.S. workers are not harmed.

**‘Earned legalization’**

The bishops said opportunities should be provided for immigrants who are in this country without proper immigration documentation to obtain legalization if they can demonstrate good moral character and have built up equities in this country. Such an “earned legalization” should be achievable and independently verifiable.

**Restoration of due process**

In recent years, immigrants have been subject to laws and policies which debase our country’s fundamental commitment to individual liberties and due process. These laws and policies include detention for months without charges, secret hearings, and ethnic profiling.

Government policies which confuse immigration with terrorism do not make us safer; they tarnish our heritage and damage our standing abroad.

The bishops urged our government to make appropriate changes consistent with due process rights. They also called for reforming our system for responding to asylum seekers. The bishops believe that our nation can both protect its citizens from terrorists and remain a safe haven for legitimate asylum seekers fleeing persecution.

Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops / <www.justiceforimmigrants.org>