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Q&A

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Questions and Answers Regarding Catholic Church Position on Immigration

What, in a nutshell, is the U.S. bishops' position on immigration reform? Does the Catechism of the Catholic Church have anything to say about this issue?

The Catholic Church believes that the current U.S. immigration system is broken and needs to be reformed in all aspects, or, comprehensively. This would include a path to citizenship for the 11-12 million undocumented in the country; a temporary worker program to allow migrant workers to enter safely and humanely; and family-based immigration reform which allows families to be reunited more quickly. The Church also teaches that the root causes of migration—namely, global economic disparities---need to be addressed.

The Church has taken a position on immigration because, besides being an economic, social, and legal issue, it is also a humanitarian one, and, ultimately has moral implications. Each day church social service programs, hospitals, schools, and parishes see the human consequences of a broken system: families are divided, migrant workers are exploited and abused, and human beings die in the desert. This impacts human dignity and human life and should be addressed.

While there is no mention of immigration specifically in the Catechism of the Church, migration is a major theme in the Gospels. Jesus and the Holy Family were refugees who fled the terror of Herod and Jesus, the Son of Man, was an itinerant teacher while on Earth, with “no place to lay His Head.” Jesus also taught us to “welcome the stranger,” for “what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me.”

The House and Senate have each passed immigration reform bills. Has the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' taken a stand on either of these proposals?

In December 2005, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. Because of its enforcement-only approach and overly punitive provisions, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed the legislation. On May 24, the U.S. Senate passed the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA) of 2006, which contains many elements which the U.S. bishops support, although which also contains tough enforcement provisions. The U.S. bishops have called the bill the right approach and right direction for comprehensive immigration reform, but has not endorsed the bill in its entirety.



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Some charge that the Church is in favor of a nation without borders, that we support illegal immigration. How do you respond to that?

The Church does not favor illegal immigration in any sense. It is not good for the migrant, who often suffers abuse by smugglers, exploitation in the workplace, and even death in the desert. It is not good for society or for local communities, because it creates a permanent underclass with no rights and no opportunity to assert them. That is why the Church supports the creation of legal avenues for migration and legal status for migrants. The Church has always supported the right of a sovereign nation to secure its borders, although it should be done in a manner that protects human life, to the greatest degree possible.

Does the Church have the right to speak out on immigration reform, which is largely a political issue?

All public policy issues---abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, poverty reduction, and immigration reform---have political aspects to them. The Church is well within Her rights to speak out on public policy issues of moral consequence and often does. In fact, the Church has a moral obligation to speak out on issues which impact human dignity and human life. In the immigration area, the Church brings special expertise to the table because we are an immigrant church and we have helped assist immigrants assimilate into the nation for years.

In general, is immigration good for our country or does it create new burdens on U.S. citizens?

Except for Native Americans, we are all descendants of immigrants or are immigrants ourselves. Immigrants have helped build the great nation we enjoy today. While opponents of immigration will attempt to raise the fears of U.S. citizens that immigrants today take away jobs, change the culture, and eat up public resources, the truth of the matter is that today's immigrants are no different than previous generations. They come to work hard and to support their families, not to take public resources or commit crimes. This is borne out in the majority of research studies on the subject, which conclude that, overall, immigrants are contributors to our economy and helpful to our local communities. They also bring a spiritual energy and richness which enriches our worship and Church.

What is a "guest worker" program? Won't such a program only encourage more illegal immigration?

A "guest worker" program is a political term for a program which provides temporary visas for migrant workers to come and work in specific industries, such as agriculture, service, and construction. The U.S. bishops have traditionally opposed such programs because they have traditionally lead to the exploitation of workers and the lowering of wages. The reality is that we now have an unofficial "guest worker" program in our nation known as the undocumented. They have no rights in the workplace but work hard and have no laws to protect them. The U.S. bishops support a program which protects the rights of both U.S. and foreign born workers and allows them the opportunity to assert their rights in the workplace. By creating legal avenues for migration, we will reduce illegal immigration flows.



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Some say that letting in too many immigrants, because they are often a cheap source of labor, could hurt the wages of workers already in the country. Is this known to be true?

Immigrant workers generally do not compete with U.S. workers for unskilled jobs. Some studies show that immigrant workers may have an impact on the job status and wages of low-skilled American workers, such as high school dropouts. Overall, however, immigrant workers fill crucial jobs in important industries that many American will not do, such as agriculture. By enacting immigration reform, the wages of immigrant workers will increase because they will be better able to assert their rights in the workplace and because the pool of unauthorized workers will dwindle.

Won't a more generous immigration policy risk allowing terrorists and other undesirables into the United States?

Quite the contrary. A more generous immigration policy will ensure that government authorities can identify and monitor who is coming into the country. If a migrant comes in legally, they will identify themselves to the government and be subject to background checks and criminals and would-be terrorist can be weeded out. Now, persons who come in without papers are not known to the government and their whereabouts are not known.

What level of border enforcement do the bishops see as necessary and appropriate?

The U.S. bishops believe that comprehensive immigration reform will reduce the pressure on the southern border by letting migrants who otherwise would cross the border illegally to enter legally through ports of entry. This would allow border patrol officials, who have a difficult task, to better protect us from smugglers and traffickers and other criminal elements. The erection of fences along our southern border will not necessarily stop illegal immigration but could lead to migrants depending more on unscrupulous smugglers and taking more dangerous routes through the desert.

What can the average Catholic in the pew do to support the kind of immigration reform that the Catholic Church endorses?

They can visit the Justice for Immigrants website at justiceforimmigrants.org. to obtain information on the position of the U.S. bishops and how they may contact their federal officials to support comprehensive immigration reform. Support from Catholic parishioners will help enact a just and humane bill.