

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT: MYTHS, FACTS & WHY THE CHURCH IS SPEAKING OUT By Martina Keller*

Today, no one disputes that national security is an important issue for all Americans. In its July 2004 report, The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (“9/11 Commission”) determined that immigration controls needed to be addressed in order to improve our national security. The 9/11 Commission also warned in its report that the protection of civil liberties must be carefully balanced with any efforts to enhance national security.

A large and important part of the immigration debate relates to enforcement. There are some people who seek to further restrict our immigration laws and believe that enforcement-only solutions are the exclusive answer to the protection of national security. Others, including the U.S. Catholic Bishops, believe that a comprehensive immigration reform, addressing both border security and the legalization of undocumented immigrants, would be a more effective and realistic approach to national security. In particular, the group in support of comprehensive reform believes that by giving the undocumented population in the U.S. the opportunity to become legal, millions of people would move out of the shadows and make themselves known to the U.S. government. The following is the third in a series of articles examining important issues in the immigration debate.

Some say that “Weak U.S. border enforcement has caused high undocumented immigration.” Recently, President Bush signed legislation into law known as the “Secure Fence Act of 2006.” This new law calls for the building of a 700 mile fence along the Southwest border with Mexico with the intent of keeping undocumented immigrants out of the U.S. This legislation was passed based on the belief that U.S. border enforcement has not been effective in keeping people out of our country.

In reality, however, the U.S. has been spending millions of dollars each year to increase border security. Over the years, the U.S. sharply increased its border patrol budget and doubled the number of agents stationed on the southwest border. In toughening its enforcement strategy, the U.S. heavily fortified common entry points at city borders and pushed migrants into dangerous desert areas in the hopes of deterring crossings. Despite increased risks due to border security, the undocumented immigrant population has doubled, and the human cost has been staggering. From January 1995 through March 2004, more than 2,640 migrants died while crossing the border. Obviously, an increase in budget and enforcement strategy has not solved the problem. The paradox of insufficient legal options for immigrants to enter the U.S. in contrast with the number of jobs available here has created a powerful economic phenomenon that is resilient to enforcement solutions. Simply said, people will risk their lives to come to the U.S. Plus, increased enforcement has led undocumented immigrants who would have returned home more quickly to stay in the U.S. longer. The facts strongly suggest that an enforcement-only strategy will not work. A fence may make the prospect of crossing into the U.S. more costly and dangerous, but it won’t eliminate the root causes of why people risk their lives to come here. For this reason, those in favor of comprehensive reform believe that national security will be enhanced by opening more opportunities for legal immigration to match the economic realities so that the flow of immigrants can be monitored and controlled. (Source: http://www.ncjrs.org/ondcpcpubs/publications/enforce/border/ins_3.html).

Some say that “The war on terrorism can be won through immigration restrictions.” It is true that the 9/11 Commission cited several immigration related issues that can be addressed to improve national security. It is also true that the individuals who carried out the devastating acts of September 11, 2001 were immigrants. What is not common knowledge, however, is that most of the 9/11 hijackers were here on legal visas and would not have been impacted by more restrictive enforcement measures. Ironically, since 9/11, the numerous measures targeting immigrants in the name of national security have netted no terrorism prosecutions. In fact, some argue that several of these measures could have the opposite effect on national security. As enforcement measures increase, targeted communities of immigrants may become afraid to come forward with information, thus making us actually less safe. (See Cato Institute: “Don’t Blame Immigrants for Terrorism”, Daniel Griswold, Assoc. Director of Cato Institute’s Center for Trade Policy Studies (see: <http://www.cato.org/dailys/10-23-01.html>).

Some say that “The Catholic Church supports illegal immigration.” In 2003, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In that pastoral letter the U.S. bishops address the complex issues affecting migration and recognize the right of sovereign nations to control and protect their borders. The bishops state: “We accept the legitimate role of the U.S...government in intercepting undocumented migrants who attempt to travel through or cross into [the country].” (<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml#8>) Despite

acknowledging this right of sovereign nations, opponents of immigration often criticize the Church as supportive of “open borders” in an attempt to discredit the Church’s voice.

The U.S. bishops do not condone unlawful entry or circumventions of our nation’s immigration laws. The bishops believe, however, that current immigration laws and policies have led to the undermining of human dignity and have kept families apart. The existing system has resulted in a rapidly growing undocumented population, living in the shadows as they work in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited. In addition, our nation’s border enforcement strategies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of immigrants. The bishops believe that comprehensive reforms are necessary to fix our broken immigration system and to respond to the realities that compel people to immigrate to the United States.

Humane and comprehensive reform of the legal immigration system will help meet these principles and make our nation safer. By allowing the undocumented population in the United States an opportunity to become legal, they would be free to come out of the shadows and be identified, allowing law enforcement to focus on those who pose a genuine threat to our national security. By creating legal avenues for migration through a worker program and family immigration reform, our government can better track those who enter our nation at the same time it reduces the incentive for undocumented immigration. Providing legal status to undocumented immigrants is an effective way to contribute to our nation’s security.

More discussion on the immigration debate and why the Church is involved will follow in the coming weeks. For more detailed information see www.justiceforimmigrants.org. * *Martina Keller, a parishioner of Queen of All Saints, is an attorney in private practice and a pro bono advisor to the Catholic Campaign on Immigration Reform for the Archdiocese of Chicago.*



THE CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM