

65 East Wacker Place • Suite 1620
Chicago, Illinois 60601
(312) 368-1066
FAX (312) 368-1090



108 East Cook Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704
(217) 528-9200
FAX (217) 528-7214

Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Illinois re: Immigration Reform

March 2006

As we continue our Lenten practices, we, the Catholic Bishops of Illinois, call on the United States Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation that will lead to a genuine welcome for the stranger in our midst.

Most today admit that our current system of immigration and border control does not work and has not for many years. Our borders are not secure, our current quotas for immigration do not realistically reflect economic, political, or social reality, and the rule of law has been significantly weakened by our current unreasonable and unworkable system. Now is not the time to overreact to what is universally acknowledged to be an intolerable situation by passing even more unrealistic and unworkable regulations. Legislation currently being considered in the United States Congress (H.R. 4437) is just such an over reaction. While recognizing the reasonable demand in a “post 9-11” world to restore the rule of law and to protect our borders, these goals cannot sensibly be accomplished through unfair laws and regulations that would criminalize much of what is currently normal civic life.

One of the provisions now being considered would criminalize the pastoral, social or health care that our churches, social service organizations, hospitals and volunteer groups provide to all people without discrimination or question of status or legal condition. Anyone providing even basic humanitarian assistance to undocumented immigrants could be charged with a felony level criminal offense. This provision is one we especially oppose as our faith calls us to serve those in need. Our churches and other Catholic institutions should not be placed in such a precarious position. Doing so does not address the currently flawed immigration system and only does harm to those in need.

In addition, the economic and personal costs associated with implementing these laws would be great. Current estimates are that we have between ten to twelve million men, women, and children living in the United States in an undocumented status. Reasonably, we cannot and should not want to deport every one of these immigrants. From a human perspective, the separation and dislocation of so many families would be devastating. From pragmatic considerations, the cost of deporting so many people would be prohibitive and, because most are at least partly integrated into the economy, the social and economic consequences to the United States could be disastrous.

Just looking at the many faces of the people recently demonstrating against H.R. 4437 in Chicago shows who would be adversely impacted by this law. These undocumented immigrants are our friends, our neighbors, our fellow human beings bound to us by a common humanity. Any just response to immigration reform must be rooted in the recognition that, ultimately, we are one human family.

We must emphasize that we are not proposing amnesty for illegal behavior. Rather, we support sensible immigration reform that secures our borders, establishes realistic enforcement strategies that will restore the rule of law, but that also allows for non-documented men and women to move towards a fully documented, legally recognized status and provides a safe, orderly, and fair system for those who wish to come to work in the United States.

(over)

What would such a law look like? We are pastors, not politicians, so we can offer only general principles. It ought to be structured so as not to appear to reward those who have not obeyed the current immigration laws. It should provide for reasonable penalties for those who are currently undocumented and wish to remain in the U.S. without disrupting their current economic situation or separating their families.

Such a law should also ensure that those who remain in the United States demonstrate that they have the potential to be productive, law abiding citizens. This could be accomplished through their paying federal and state taxes, achieving English language proficiency and adequate citizenship knowledge, maintaining a clean police record, and contributing to their communities for a reasonable, but sufficiently long span of time. This would result in an "earned" citizenship.

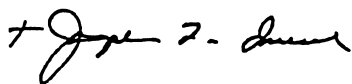
This system should also provide the greatest incentives for people to enter the U.S. through the normal, though revised, immigration process by providing realistic opportunities, reflective of the demands of the labor market, to enter the U.S. in order to work (at even non-skilled or low-skilled jobs).

As the United States Senate begins debate on this issue, we find the McCain-Kennedy proposal (S. 1033) in the Senate accommodates most of these principles.

We are largely a nation of immigrants and their descendants and we all have benefited from our country's tradition of welcoming immigrants. Our nation's vitality and economic success come, to a large extent, as a result of immigration. Men, women and children historically have come, and continue to come, to our nation for a variety of reasons: personal safety, economic opportunity, and educational advancement. We recognize that the homelands of those coming to the United States must also consider their own systems and address some of these reasons so that migration may be motivated not by necessity, but by choice. Yet as immigrants do continue to come here, we also know that their vitality, work, and presence have made and will continue to make our nation even greater. They are our brothers and sisters, and we should find ways to welcome them.



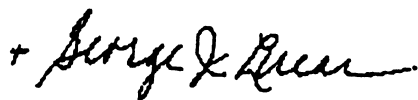
His Eminence Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago



Most Reverend Joseph L. Imesch
Bishop of Joliet



Most Reverend Thomas G. Doran
Bishop of Rockford



Most Reverend George J. Lucas
Bishop of Springfield-in-Illinois



Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.
Bishop of Peoria



Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton
Bishop of Belleville