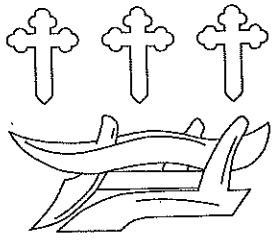


Archdiocese of Cincinnati



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Why We Need Comprehensive Immigration Reform
Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr

We bishops are trying to be clear in expressing the basic moral principles involved in efforts to reform our immigration laws. These moral principles are founded on the inherent, God-given dignity of the human person. We have supported rallies, marches, various educational programs, and the U.S. bishops' advocacy campaign. Yet for many Catholics, especially those who may not deal with immigrants on a daily basis or come into regular contact with our federal immigration system, there may be many legitimate questions about the Church's passion around this issue. Why is the Church spending so much energy trying to revamp our nation's immigration system? Why are we not simply asking that our government do a better job enforcing the system that we already have? Does the Church support open borders and lawlessness? In response, I hope that I can offer some clarification about the Church's teaching and position on this issue. In addition, I pray that these reflections offer you some insights for your own grappling with this difficult and often controversial issue.

One of the fundamental principles behind any moral immigration system is that nations have the right to protect their own borders. Governments have a duty to achieve the common good of the citizens whom they represent. And, in turn, residents of any land have a duty to respect the rule of law. To that end, the U.S. bishops want to see to it that our country has an orderly process that sensibly regulates the flow of migrants and keeps us safe from threats of terrorism, violence, drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

At the same time, the Catholic Church also teaches that all human beings have a right to migrate. First and foremost, every one of us, as a child of God and regardless of our national affiliation, has a right to work to provide for ourselves and our family. Ideally, we should be able to find work in our own countries. However, if such work cannot be found at home, what choice do we have other than to go wherever we can find our livelihood? Any responsible person, charged with the holy work of sustaining life, our own life and the lives of our family members, has a right and duty to migrate if that is the only option.

So how does a nation responsibly balance the right and duty to protect our borders with the right and duty to migrate? How do we live up to the commands of Scripture, where God states, "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:33-34)? Remembering always that the Holy Family, fleeing persecution in its own land, was also a migrant family, how do we today unfurl the welcome mat to Christ present in the thousands of immigrants coming to the doorstep and still keep our own house orderly and safe?

It is first important to remind ourselves that most of the laws that define our system today did not even exist before the twentieth century. Moreover, they have been amended and changed over time in order to seek this difficult balance.

What we are left with today, however, is a bureaucracy that fails to respond to current economic and social realities. Now with an estimated 12 million people residing in our country without documentation, we are facing a complete breakdown of the rule of law and order. We bishops, along with many others, believe that this is another one of those times when we must reconsider how to bring things back on track.

We are in this predicament because, the sad truth is, there are few visas available for immigrants to actually migrate here legally. Each year, Congress allocates only 5,000 permanent visas for "unskilled workers," even though hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants are finding jobs in this category. In addition, the spouses, children and other immediate relatives of many of those who did enter legally end up having to wait years to be reunited with their loved ones. For example, a man from Mexico who would be fortunate enough to get a permanent employment visa to work here would still have to wait about four years before his wife and children could join him. For a Filipino to have his brother or sister come join him, it would take twenty-two years!

While this Archdiocese does not host one of the heaviest concentrations of foreign-born residents in the nation, the stories of local migrant families still ring loudly to many of us. In our parishes, our Catholic schools, and our social service agencies, Catholic citizens worship, learn and live beside more recent immigrants to this land. Consequently, we are also wounded when we witness these immigrant families torn apart by an out-of-balance immigration system. On a number of occasions, we have heard of fathers never making it home from work after being picked up by immigration, leaving wives and kids dependent upon others' charity for food and rent. In one case, a Ugandan mother was picked up by immigration 15 years after starting her family here, torn from her two daughters, who were born and raised here as U.S. citizens in our Catholic schools. She was separated from her loving husband and kids and shuffled to various prisons and detention facilities around the country for 5 months, until she was granted a request for an asylum hearing.

The way the bishops see it, the problem with the countless situations similar to these is, not that all such immigrants should have been immediately given amnesty upon entering the country, but that there were too few paths available for them to come here the right way to begin with. In short, we feel we can do better.

In the meantime, too many undocumented residents are living in fear, hiding in the shadows. Too frequently we have heard stories where they are exploited by employers who steal their wages or fire them once injured on the job. Too often, in families where some members are legal residents and others are not, parents and spouses avoid reporting being victims of crime to the proper authorities because they don't want to be separated from their loved ones who can't follow them back to their countries of origin. For reasons like these, the Church opposes enforcement-only measures which serve primarily to instill greater fear among immigrants and division among people of good will in our communities rather than solve the broken system behind it all. It seems that only comprehensive immigration reform can simultaneously restore both order and human dignity.

What the Church is calling for are continued global anti-poverty efforts, so that immigrants do not have to leave their homes out of necessity; a reduction in the backlogs of the family-based visa system; a temporary worker program that actually provides paths to legal residency for laborers and better protection of their rights; an earned path to legalization for the undocumented already here so that they can responsibly take their place in a line that will not take years to process (i.e. not necessarily amnesty); and a restoration of due process for immigrants who are here without papers, such as those seeking asylum.

It is my hope that Catholics in particular answer this call to support our migrant brothers and sisters during these difficult times. I would ask that priests, teachers, religious and lay leaders do what they can to offer educational opportunities for Catholics of this Archdiocese to hear the stories of immigrants in our communities and to understand the Church's rich teaching on this matter. Among other places, there are many resources available to us through our Catholic Charities, Hispanic Ministries, Catholic Social Action, and Mission efforts. You can learn more by visiting the U.S. Bishops' website on this at www.justiceforimmigrants.org. There is also a postcard campaign that we are conducting to our federal legislators, requesting that they fix our immigration system. You can obtain them by downloading them from this website or by contacting the Catholic Social Action Office at (513) 421-3131 or (937) 224-3026.

Finally, to my immigrant brothers and sisters and all of you who work with them in their cause to build a better life, I give thanks for all you do in the name of human life and dignity. Know that the Holy Spirit will continue to be with you in your struggle for justice.

With prayerful best wishes, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dennis M. Schnurr". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati

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