



Statement On Immigration
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
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To the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Sioux Falls,

Several bills have been introduced into the South Dakota Legislature that seek to address the complex issue of immigration. These are in part a response to the failure of the current federal immigration laws and regulations to halt illegal immigration and the resulting economic, social and fiscal impact this has had on many state and local governments. Also of concern is the increasing violence along our nation's borders that has been perpetrated by criminals who respect neither law nor persons.

This issue is complex because of the sometimes conflicting economic, social, cultural, regulatory, law enforcement and humanitarian factors. Therefore it should be approached carefully, thoughtfully and in an appropriate context.

It is inviting to discuss this issue in generalities and impersonally. The fact however is that every immigrant, legal or not, is a person gifted by God with life and deserving of being treated with dignity. Further, every immigrant is born of a family whose bonds stretch across borders and citizenships. All of us must be held accountable for choices we have made, but all of us should also be allowed appropriate due process and afforded the proper respect as a human person.

It is important to recall our history. We are a nation of immigrants. The histories of our state and diocese are filled with heroic stories of those who came from many countries, some welcomed and some not, endured significant sacrifice and hardship, but with faith in God and by living Gospel values, persevered. We are the beneficiaries of their faith filled efforts.

We might also recall that Catholics emigrating from other countries were not always welcomed, including here in South Dakota. That history should make us even more sensitive to the impact of our words and actions and those of our government at all levels who speak in our name.

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of that history when he visited the United States several years ago. He encouraged us "to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in sorrow and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home. This, indeed, is what your fellow countrymen have done for generations. From the beginning, they have opened their doors to the tired, the poor, the 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' These are the people whom America has made her own."¹

¹ – Pope Benedict XVI, interview during His Holiness' flight to America, April 15, 2008

Most people would agree with that intention. Most would also agree that the current immigration system, both the laws that guide who and under what circumstances one can enter the country and the enforcement of those laws, is not adequate, is not working and in many ways is discriminatory. Change is necessary. The question is what form that change should take and who is the appropriate change agent.

The Catholic Bishops in the United States have identified five principles by which to assess public policy and proposals in this complex area. They include:

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland; conditions ought to be such that persons can work and support his or her family in dignity and safety;
- Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families when they are unable to find work and therefore are unable to support their families at home;
- Sovereign nations have a right to protect and control their borders for the common good;
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection; and
- The human rights and the human dignity of all persons including undocumented immigrants should be respected.

Archbishop José Gomez, Coadjutor Archbishop of Los Angeles and Chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration, recently testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement. He noted that the current numbers of work visas available for low-skilled workers to legally enter the country and to live and work are “woefully insufficient” which encourages illegal immigration. He also noted that an enforcement only immigration policy will not solve this complex problem for the long term. He said:

“Rather we support comprehensive immigration reform to fix what has become a broken system. Such reform would include: *(bulleted format added)*

- an earned legalization program for foreign nationals of good moral character;
- the reform of the family-based immigration system;
- a revamped temporary worker regime that protects both the workers who would come to the United States and the U.S. citizen workers;
- the restoration of immigrants’ due process rights, and;
- an effort to meaningfully address the root cause of migration, such as under-development and poverty in sending countries.
- Moreover, such reform would include the targeted, proportional and humane enforcement of immigration laws.

“The U.S. Bishops accept the legitimate role of the U.S. government in intercepting unauthorized migrants who attempt to travel in the United States. The U.S. Bishops also believe that by increasing lawful means for migrants to enter, live and work in the United States, law enforcement will be better able to focus upon those who threaten public safety: drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and would-be terrorists. It is our view that comprehensive immigration reform would help restore the rule of law by replacing unauthorized migration flows with meaningful and adequate legal avenues for migration, compatible with both our future labor needs and our ongoing prioritization of family reunification.”²

I associate myself completely with the comments of Archbishop Gomez.

Legislation, such as those proposed in the current legislative session, that cannot address the fullness of the problem will prove futile. Such legislation also could result in conflicting laws among the states that could lead to the abuse of human rights, disruptions of families in ways that especially adversely affect children, and send a message of hostility when Jesus calls us to welcome the stranger, to love others as he has loved us.

A more fruitful approach would be for public officials in our state, and all of us as citizens, to petition the Congress and the President to courageously enact comprehensive immigration reform that addresses the disease and not just the symptoms, the underlying issues and not just the surface ones. Then we should support them when they do.

Pope John Paul the Great reminded us: “The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society, the common world-wide fellowship of men.”³

Together as one family under God, we can address with charity and justice the complex immigration issues in ways that protect the rights of all persons and assure the security of our country.

May St. Joseph, who protected our Lord when he as a child was not welcomed, intercede for us.

² – Testimony of Most Reverend José H. Gomez to House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement, January 26, 2011

³ – Pope John Paul II, message given for the 90th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2004, Dec 15, 2003