

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

# Answering tough questions about immigration

*U.S. bishops advocate mending broken system and improving economic development in poor countries*

By Bishop John C. Wester

**Editor's note:** In light of the recent debate over Arizona's new immigration law and responses to Archbishop Jose H. Gomez's essay "Archbishop: Catholics' role in immigration reform solution" in our May 2 issue, Our Sunday Visitor asked Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, to answer some of our readers' toughest questions about the Church's position on immigration.

**Question:** What don't the bishops understand about "illegal"? Why disrespect the rule of law?

**Answer:** The U.S. bishops and the teachings of the Catholic Church have consistently respected the right of the sovereign to control its borders, as well as the rule of civil law. However, the Church, along with other members of our democratic society, has the right to work to change laws which are believed to violate basic human dignity, dignity imbued by the Creator.

In the case of immigration, the U.S. bishops believe that the broken U.S. immigration system contributes to the exploitation of migrant workers in the workplace; their abuse by ruthless smugglers; and their deaths in the desert as they seek to find work to support their families. They come illegally because there are insufficient visas under the current system to come legally. Our system contains only 5,000 permanent visas for unskilled laborers to come to the United States, but the demand for their work is much higher, since as many as 300,000 undocumented people each year are absorbed into the U.S. workforce.

Comprehensive immigration reform, which the U.S. bishops support, would replace illegality with a system based on legal presence and legal entry, thus restoring the rule of law to a chaotic system while also protecting the basic dignity, and lives, of our fellow broth-

ers and sisters. It would require those who have broken the law to get on the right side of it by paying a fine, taxes, learning English and waiting in the back of a long line to have a chance to become a U.S. citizen. This "path to citizenship" is in the best interests of migrants, who are able to become full members of their communities, and our nation, which will continue to benefit from their contributions without sacrificing our long-held values as a nation of immigrants: freedom, fairness and opportunity.

**Question:** Is this welcoming of Latinos because they are Catholic? If not, do you also support opening our borders to impoverished people from Arab and Asian countries?

**Answer:** The support of the U.S. bishops for immigration reform is not because the majority of immigrants at this point in our history are Latino or Catholic. The Catholic Church heeds Our Lord's call to "welcome the stranger" to all children of God, regardless of their ethnicity, national origin, race or religion. This is evident in all of the social-service programs of the Catholic Church, which base their outreach on "need," not "creed."

Having said that, the fact that the majority of immigrants are Catholic makes it more real for many Catholics, since many immigrants are present in our service programs, health care centers, schools and parishes. We, as a Catholic community, directly witness the human consequences of a broken system each day, when immigrant families come to pastors and employees and ask for help for a family member who has been detained or deported by immigration authorities. We can only help these families, and keep them together, by changing our immigration laws.

Finally, despite assertions to the contrary, the U.S. bishops do not support "open borders," but support generous, but reasonable, immigration policies that serve the common good.



Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City blesses a girl during a special Mass for immigrants at St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., on March 21. CNS photo by Nancy Wiechec

**Question:** The current situation of illegal immigration is causing an unsustainable strain on social services. Do the bishops not see that as a problem?

**Answer:** There are several myths in this area. First of all, most studies show that, although at an early age immigrants consume more than they contribute, over a lifetime they are net contributors to our economy through the taxes they pay, the goods they produce and consume, and their labor. Moreover, legal immigrants do not qualify for welfare or health care for the first five years of their residency in the United States, while undocumented immigrants never qualify for such benefits. In fact, undocumented immigrants pay billions in income taxes each year and at least \$7 billion in Social Security taxes, helping to sustain Social Security for the baby-boomer generation.

By adopting comprehensive immigration reform and providing the undocumented legal status, the United States would receive even more income taxes and Social Security payments from immigrants, since they would be required to register with the government and pay their full share.

**Question:** Why should not the priority be on the development in the countries the im-

migrants come from so they do not want to come here in the first place?

**Answer:** In fact, the U.S. bishops have stated that Congress should look at the "push factors," such as the lack of living-wage employment, that compel immigrants to leave their home countries and risk their lives to come to the United States in search of jobs.

As a global institution, the Catholic Church believes that the most humane and effective long-term solution to irregular immigration is economic development in poorer countries, so that people can stay in their home countries and support their families in dignity. In the context of the current immigration debate, this is the Church's answer to a border wall, which will not prevent irregular migration over the long term. The Church believes that migration should ultimately be driven by choice, not necessity.

**Question:** What kind of immigration reform do the bishops want exactly? Amnesty? Open borders?

**Answer:** Neither. The U.S. bishops' prescription for mending our broken system is to bring the 11 million undocumented out of the shadows, register them with the government, require them to pay a fine

and any taxes owed, and require them to learn English and work as they wait in the back of the line for a chance for citizenship. This is not "amnesty," which is generally defined as granting a benefit without anything in return.

The U.S. bishops would also support an increase in family-based and employment-based visas so that immigrant families could migrate to the United States in a safe, legal and controlled manner, and not be subject to the abuse of human smugglers or to death in the desert.

It is our view that making changes to the legal immigration system will help ease pressure on our border by taking undocumented immigrants out of the enforcement equation, freeing up law enforcement to focus upon those who are here to harm us — drug smugglers, human traffickers, and would-be terrorists — and not those simply looking for a job.

We also believe, as mentioned earlier, that Congress should examine how the root causes of migration can be addressed, so that migrants can stay where they are and work in dignity.

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