



DIOCESE OF VENICE IN FLORIDA

Office of the Bishop

Statement on Immigration Legislation

4/19/06

Dear Friends in Christ,

Once more we in southwest Florida, other parts of our beloved state, and the whole nation are faced with crucial immigration issues. Today's issues, however, are even more significant to our ten-county Diocese of Venice, given the fact that between 150,000 to 200,000 Hispanic workers and their families are among us. Thousands of them harvest the tomatoes and citrus crops in the fields of our agricultural industry. Thousands more care for our lawns and grounds, or serve as workers in our hotels and other tourist facilities. They not only contribute substantially to the economy of southwest Florida, but also fill jobs that most often are avoided by our other working citizens.

For several months now both the Administration and the U.S. Congress have debated as to what should be contained in a comprehensive immigration reform law. As we all know, the House of Representatives has concluded with a version that, if enacted, would be most punitive and harsh toward many of our Latino and Hispanic brothers and sisters. The U.S. Senate was able to forge a more humanitarian approach to this critical subject. However, it was not able to bring its proposals to a satisfactory conclusion prior to adjourning for the Holy Easter Season.

It is with this background in mind that I address our priests, religious, the faithful, and all good friends in the Diocese of Venice.

WORKING TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE REFORM

1. It is fitting that the lawmakers representing southwest Florida and elsewhere reject outright, the punitive measures incorporated in the current legislation (HR 4437) passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in December, 2005. To criminalize our Hispanic and Latino brothers and sisters and to propose that those responsible for meeting their health and social needs also be declared criminals is totally incomprehensible. Homeland security can be achieved without such harsh measures.
2. Both our Honorable Senators and Representatives should be urged to ensure that reform includes opportunities for both legal and undocumented immigrants who are present in the United States to enter into a process that will eventually lead to citizenship and legal status.
3. We continually learn of horror stories in which parents are torn away from their children, given the maze of legalities which separate family members. Or, members remain nations apart for years upon years because of delays and excessive time intervals demanded by our current laws and regulations. Our Congressmen and Congresswomen are urged to

incorporate in a final version of a proposed immigration law more compassionate policies to family reunification.

A PERSPECTIVE ON IMMIGRATION

The hallmark of American history has been its longtime acceptance of newcomers to our borders. Personally, I'm a son of an Irish immigrant, of father and mother, both of whom loved this country. So, I'm a first generation American. Today, many people in the United States can recall the accounts of their parents who came here under duress, seeking freedom and economic opportunity. There also were trying days. I will always remember and recall how my beloved mother, four days after she arrived in New York in 1928, was denied work because she was both Irish and Catholic. I often thank God that most of our ethnic friends have achieved the American Dream.

The 1960s were filled with turmoil as our African American brothers and sisters sought human dignity and full citizenship. These were partially restored through the Civil Rights laws enacted by the U.S. Government. There is still more to be done in their behalf.

In 1995, the late and beloved Pope John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia in America* that economic and other dynamic forces in the world have resulted in deeper and more serious inter-dependence among nations. This era will be characterized by an even greater flow of populations between national borders. He pleaded for migrants to be met in a hospitable manner and with kind attitudes.

Here we are in the beginning of a new millennium, and we are faced with similar issues. It is different only because of the travesty of 9/11. We cannot minimize the importance of protecting our nation from terrorism. On the other hand, we must refrain from visiting gross injustices and inhumane treatment on our Latino and Hispanic communities. Regardless of their status, they work hard and they make every effort to feed, clothe and shelter their families. They pay taxes and serve all of us through their jobs in a vast cross section of our industries.

An Immigration Reform bill finally enacted by Congress and signed by our President should reflect the best moral values of America. It should be consistent with God's plan, a plan based on the principles of justice.

In conclusion, I ask in addition to action on this matter, that our priests and faithful pray fervently that our policy makers in Washington will come to terms with these complex issues and enact laws which will fully respect the human dignity of all our immigrants.

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