



NEWS

Department of Communications
3211 Fourth Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017
202-541-3200
Fax 202-541-3173
www.usccb.org/comm

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FROM: John Gehring

O- 213-312-8421

H- 410-302-3792

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BISHOPS CALL FOR COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM; URGE RESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS

LOS ANGELES— Legislative debates over how to restructure the nation’s immigration system should approach any policy change as a moral issue that protects the dignity of all immigrants, a panel of bishops said today at a press conference held during their national meeting.

Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, CA; Bishop Gerald R. Barnes of San Bernardino, CA.; Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, NY; Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, AZ and Auxiliary Bishop Jaime Soto of Orange, CA. called on congressional leaders to enact comprehensive immigration reform that addresses the root causes of migration and creates an earned path to citizenship for undocumented workers.

Cardinal Mahony described the current immigration system as “morally unacceptable because it accepts the labor and taxes of millions of workers without offering them the protection of the law.”

“At the same time, we scapegoat these newcomers for our social ills and use them as rhetorical targets for political purposes,” Cardinal Mahony said. “While the immigration debate to date has focused on the economic, legal, and social/cultural aspects of the issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian, and moral, issue.”

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Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, the Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, said the bishops have a "long history of advocating for just and fair immigration laws," and have concluded that the current immigration system is "seriously flawed with respect to the treatment of immigrants and does not serve the common good of our nation."

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, the Chairman of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Board of Directors, highlighted several concerns the bishops have about recent congressional action on immigration that he hoped would be corrected in conference committee. "For example, we understand the logic behind the three-tiered system included in the Senate bill, but believe it might be difficult to administer and that it unfairly leaves behind many who may be eligible," Bishop DiMarzio said. "For those persons who have been here two years or less, we are fearful that the requirement to return home and come back through a temporary worker program is unrealistic in that many would not participate and would remain in the shadows."

Bishops are meeting in Los Angeles June 15-17 for the spring meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Attached are the complete statements given by Cardinal Roger Mahony, Bishop Gerald R. Barnes and Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio.

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Statement of His Eminence Roger Cardinal Mahony

I would like to thank Bishop Barnes for his kind invitation to join the Committee on Migration and the CLINIC board today for this important press conference.

As you have heard, the issue of immigration reform is an important one for the U.S. Catholic bishops as well as our nation. We have specific solutions to the immigration crisis we face in our nation.

However, some in the Catholic community and in the public square generally have asked why the issue is important and why the church is so involved and compelled to speak out on it. I would like to respond, respectfully, to those who question our involvement and who may disagree with our message.

Why are we involved? Fundamentally it is because it is our Gospel mandate, our instruction from our Savior to “welcome the stranger.” In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ teaches us that salvation is gained by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger, for “what you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done unto me.” He teaches us in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we must help all of our fellow human beings, even though they may be different from us in many respects.

We also are involved because we see each day in our dioceses, parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools increased suffering because families are separated and persons are forced to live on the margins of society. In border states such as California, we see persons exploited by smugglers and men, women, and children dying in the desert. This suffering must end.

We also see an immigration system which is morally unacceptable because it accepts the labor and taxes of millions of workers without offering them the protection of the law. At the same time, we scapegoat these newcomers for our social ills and use them as rhetorical targets for political purposes.

While the immigration debate to date has focused on the economic, legal, and social/cultural aspects of the issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian, and moral, issue.

It is therefore incumbent upon our elected officials, including Catholics, to carefully scrutinize these laws so as to serve basic human dignity and protect human life. Laws and policies which infringe upon dignity and harm human life are wrong and, as a moral matter, should be rebuffed or repealed.

As Bishop Barnes stated, our nation has an opportunity to make history at this moment by reforming the system comprehensively in a humane manner. We should not let this moment pass. This must include a workable and viable path to citizenship for the undocumented, a temporary worker program which protects the rights of all workers, family reunification, and enforcement measures which are humane. I believe that the majority of Catholics, as well as the public, support this recipe.

Thank you.

Statement of Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio

Thank you, Bishop Barnes, for including me in this event.

I would like to point out for you some of our concerns we have about what Congress has done to date which we hope will be corrected in the conference committee.

As Bishop Barnes stated, we would like to see a program which allows the undocumented to earn citizenship to be both workable and viable. In other words, we do not want to see a formula which causes confusion, inefficiencies, and could lead to fraud. We also do not want to see a program which is not easily implemented.

For example, we understand the logic behind the three-tiered system included in the Senate bill, but believe it might be difficult to administer and that it unfairly leaves behind many who may be eligible. For those persons who have been here two years or less, we are fearful that the requirement to return home and come back through a temporary worker program is unrealistic, in that many would not participate and would remain in the shadows. For those here from 2-5 years, we would like to see more detail on the requirement to return and “touch base,” as it has been described.

In short, we would like to see a path to citizenship which treats all in a similar way but allows those who have been here longer priority in the system, behind those already in line.

As for a temporary worker program, we feel strongly that a self-petitioning mechanism must be included in any program—in other words, persons should be allowed to apply for a green card on their own and not be dependent on an employer to do it for them. In addition, we would like to see worker protections strengthened in the bill.

In the enforcement area, we, of course, have concerns about the erection of hundreds of miles of fencing along our southern border. We do not believe it will deter migrants from attempting to enter and may lead them into more perilous routes. Legal avenues should help relieve the pressure on the border.

We also have concerns about how asylum seekers and refugees are treated in these bills. The expansion of expedited removal is of concern, as well as provisions which would criminalize asylum seekers for using false documents to enter the country.

In addition, due process protections are removed in many cases, for both legal immigrants and asylum seekers. Mandatory detention along our border could lead to the separation of families and to the incarceration of vulnerable groups, such as trafficking victims, victims of domestic violence, and children. The authorization of local law enforcement to enforce immigration law takes away from the ability of those local authorities to apprehend real criminals and destroy trust between local police and immigrant communities.

Finally, we urge House and Senate leaders, as well as the White House, to carefully consider the tools available for implementing this bill. US Citizenship and Immigration Services should be provided the necessary funding and personnel to implement this program efficiently. Community groups and nonprofit groups who interface with migrants and their families should be included in this implementation.

As has been stated, we believe this is an historic opportunity to correct our flawed immigration system. We must get it right and not make the mistakes of the past.

Thank you.

Statement of Bishop Barnes

I welcome you to this press event on behalf of the USCCB Committee on Migration and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. I am joined by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, bishop of Brooklyn and chairman of CLINIC and members of both committees—Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson and Bishop Jaime Soto of Orange. I would also welcome His Eminence Roger Cardinal Mahony, the host of the bishops' meeting this week and the archbishop of Los Angeles.

Our nation stands at a critical moment. Our congressional leaders and the president have the opportunity to enact historic immigration reform legislation before the end of the year. We urge them to seize this moment and enact legislation which is comprehensive and which provides an earned path to citizenship for the undocumented population in this country.

Over the past twelve years, our government has spent over \$25 billion on enforcement of our border. During the same period, the number of undocumented in the nation has nearly doubled. Tragically, nearly 3000 migrants have perished in the deserts of the American Southwest at the same time.

It is clear that an enforcement-only approach to immigration reform has failed and that our country needs a more diversified approach. The House of Representatives passed a border security bill in December which helped start the legislative process and the Senate has recently passed a bill which more comprehensively addresses the immigration crisis. While the Senate bill contains some harmful provisions, we believe it contains the essential elements necessary to bring justice to immigrants, including a path to citizenship for the undocumented and changes to our employment and family-based immigration systems.

As both the House and Senate prepare to reconcile these two bills, we urge them to agree to a bill which improves upon what both chambers have done. Any bill reported by a conference committee should contain a path to citizenship, a temporary worker program, family-based immigration reform which reduces backlogs. It also should restore basic due process protections for immigrants and refrain from criminalizing immigrants and those who assist them with their basic needs.

As bishops, we understand that the immigration issue is an emotional one and that Catholics and others in the debate disagree with our proposed solution to the immigration crisis. We will continue to engage with those who disagree and dialogue with them. However, we strongly feel that only a comprehensive approach to this problem will not only serve the best interests of our nation but also protect the basic human dignity and human life of the migrant.

We call upon Congress to put aside partisan differences and enact a bill which repairs a seriously flawed immigration system before adjournment for the year.