



The Catholic Church and the Immigration Crisis

Good Intentions, Troubling Consequences

The immigration crisis became all too visible this summer with the flood of tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S. southern border. Americans' hearts went out to the plight of these children. Although many of these immigrants were in their teens, television and print media showed younger children warehoused by the federal government on military bases, crowded together on makeshift cots and looking forlorn. Photos of tattooed Salvadorian gang members appeared on some conservative websites and Fox News, but the general impression conveyed was one of a humanitarian crisis. The United Nations has called those fleeing El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala "political refugees." Immigration activists have called upon President Obama to issue an executive order declaring amnesty for these undocumented aliens. In September, President Obama reneged on his controversial pledge to issue a "gateway for citizenship" on Labor Day, promising instead to issue an executive order right after the November midterm elections.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has been a leading voice in the call for amnesty for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in America today. In September 2013, Kevin Appleby, the director of immigration policy for the Conference, told the *New York Times* that "We want to pull out the stops" to press for comprehensive immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship. Columnist Mike Flynn, writing for the conservative news website *breitbart.com*, observed, "The Church's effort in support of amnesty seems broader and more coordinated than its actions against an ObamaCare mandate requiring coverage of contraception." While this might be an exaggeration, there is no doubt that the Catholic bishops are a leading force behind the call for amnesty. The summer inundation of unaccompanied minors has given new impetus to the Church for renewing this call.

The Catholic Church in America prides itself on being an immigrant church. This is not false pride. The millions of Irish, German, Polish, Italian and many other nationalities who came to America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made the American church exceptionally diverse, vibrant and politically powerful. Coming to a Protestant culture, Catholic immigrants and their church experienced religious prejudice, social and economic discrimination, and political hostility. Nineteenth-century political campaigns frequently used anti-Catholicism to rally voters. Only after the Second World War would Catholics be fully integrated into American society. Facing this earlier hostility, the Catholic Church in the United States proclaimed its adherence to American democratic principles and values.

The bishops' commitment to Christian social justice (see the February 2014 *Mindszenty Report*) frames their support of amnesty. Unlike some immigration activists, the USCCB is not anti-American. It does not seek to undermine the cultural foundation of the nation or to return the "stolen" territories of California, New Mexico and Arizona to Mexico.

Helping Some May Hurt Others

The question is whether amnesty—or a quick pathway to citizenship, as supporters call it—actually benefits or hurts the nation economically, socially and culturally. Will amnesty stop the flood of immigrants crossing the American southern border or make the problem worse? Have the millions of undocumented workers who have come to the United States in the last decade helped or hurt the millions of Americans who are unemployed or have dropped out of the workforce because they have given up hope of ever finding a job? Can our local schools and communities and states support and assimilate millions of immigrants who have crossed the border illegally? Is the USCCB's pursuit of social justice actually leading to even greater social injustice for the nation, its workers and all its citizens?

Church Teaching on Immigration

The Church's teaching on immigration is found in No. 2241 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which states that "The more prosperous nations are obliged *to the extent they are able*, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of a livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him." The Catechism declares further that "Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate *subject to various juridical conditions*, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to *obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens*." (Emphasis added.)

The italicized qualifications as to the Church's stance on immigration are important. The USCCB proclamations on immigration show less reserve. As Jimmy Akin noted in an op-ed for the *National Catholic Register* (6/14/10), the bishops' 2007 document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" has been treated by the media as advocacy for an open borders policy. It's easy to understand why. "Forming Consciences" calls for "comprehensive immigration reform" to include "a temporary work program with workers' protections; a path to permanent residency; family reunifications policies; a broad and fair legalization program; access to legal protections, including due process and essential public programs; refuge for those fleeing persecution and exploitation; and policies to address the root causes of migration."

The document rightly concludes, "The right and responsibility of nations to control their borders and to maintain the rule of law should be recognized." Recognizing this responsibility, however, is not the same as acting on it. President Obama recognizes this responsibility. He repeats his recognition of this responsibility in every speech he gives on immigration, while promoting comprehensive reform—amnesty.

John Wester, bishop of Utah, clarified "Forming Consciences" in an interview with *Our Sunday Visitor* (5/5/10) by stating that the U.S. bishops do not support "open borders," but favor "generous, but reasonable, immigration policies that serve the common good." He called for addressing the root causes of migration. Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York has shown

less restraint than Bishop Wester. Cardinal Dolan blogged in September that he considered a California crowd angrily protesting against busloads of homeless immigrants "un-American," "un-biblical" and "inhumane." He compared the protesters to "nativist mobs in the 1840s, the Know-Nothing gangs in the 1850s and the KKK thugs in the 1920s, who hounded and harassed immigrants, Catholics, Jews and Blacks."

The USCCB's call for amnesty expresses a spiritual concern for caring for tens of thousands of the poor who have fled poverty, unemployment, violence and a grim future in their home countries for a promise of a better life in America. Less consideration has been given to the unintended consequences of privileging these tens of thousands of illegal aliens who have broken U.S. law to enter the country, the costs of states and local communities in providing welfare, housing and education for these people, or the impact on unemployed or low-wage American citizens and legal residents. Even less attention has been paid to the national security problems raised by an open border policy—a problem made all too apparent with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East.

Consider These Facts

The bishops should be respectfully asked to consider three real problems with immigration today: American workers, schools and the rule of law.

AMERICAN WORKERS: Today illegal immigrants make up 10 percent of the workforce in California. They are mostly found working in agriculture and construction. Pro-amnesty supporters claim that these illegal workers are contributing to the growth of the California economy, but critics point to the large costs incurred by local and state government in providing schools and other services to immigrants who entered here without permission. Proponents avoid discussing the larger issue of illegal immigrants displacing American workers, especially in the construction trades in California, where 14 percent of the workforce are illegal immigrants.

The Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank in Washington, D.C. that favors more restrictive immigration policies, recently conducted a study in North Carolina which concluded that the net increase in the number of employed working-age adults in the state has gone entirely to legal and illegal immigrants since 2000. This study suggests that illegal immigration is not helping American workers who are already here looking for jobs in an economy that is undergoing a transformation from a manufacturing economy to a high-tech knowledge economy.

Unemployment remains a major problem in the United States. In August, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, a record 92,269,000 Americans aged 16 and older were unemployed or not seeking a job. The labor force participation rate, 62.8 percent, was the lowest since the economic malaise of the late 1970s. Nearly 3 million 25- to 54-year-olds have dropped out since 2007. Unemployment was 6.1 percent, which significantly understates the true unemployment situation because so many people have given up looking for jobs and many of the new jobs that have been created in the last eight years are part-time.

In this dire economic situation, American workers find themselves having to compete for scarce jobs with illegal immigrants who are willing to work for less. The pro-amnesty argument that illegals are willing to do the work that American workers don't want to do fails to address the real issue of whether, in a prolonged era of high unemployment, federal policies should be encouraging a flood of cheap labor into the United States. Does anyone really believe that illegal immigration does not suppress American wages?

SCHOOLS: Across the country, local school superintendents and school boards complain that educational resources are being overwhelmed by unaccompanied immigrant children placed in their schools by federal authorities who have not consulted with school authorities or state officials in this action.

Governor Jerry Brown of California revealed in his first debate against Republican Neel Kashkari on September 5 that nearly 30 percent of the state's schoolchildren are either illegal immigrants or do not speak English. What he did not add was that many of these children are illiterate, unable to read or write in their native language. School officials in other states have complained that illegal immigrants being placed in their schools are 15- and 16-year-olds who cannot read or write Spanish, but are being placed in lower grades to satisfy educational requirements.

Governor Brown declared before the debate that illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America were "all welcome in California." He expressed pride that his state was setting the pace on immigration laws including bills that gave driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, made California a sanctuary state (Trust Act) and granted in-state tuition to illegal immigrants (California DREAM Act). There are 2.6 million illegal immigrants in California. He did not mention that the Los Angeles school district is on the verge of financial collapse and is notoriously bad in fulfilling its mission of educating children. Los Angeles schools, as well

as other school districts in Southern California, are gang-ridden, with teachers spending more time trying to maintain control in their classrooms and prevent violence than they spend trying to teach basic subjects.

LAW AND ORDER: Violence prevails on our southern border. Ranchers along the Texas and Arizona border with Mexico report that they live in fear for their lives and the lives of their families. Mexican drug cartels use death threats, assault and murder to drive ranchers and their families off their land.

The problem of law and order goes beyond the border. Illegal immigration is clogging the legal system. The backlog of pending deportation cases in the federal immigration court has risen to nearly 400,000. This backlog has grown by more than 75,000 cases since the start of the budget year last October. Since October 2013 Homeland Security reports that more than 50,000 unaccompanied child immigrants, mostly from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, have been caught crossing the Mexican border illegally. More than 66,000 additional immigrants traveling as families, mostly mothers and young children, have been caught.

We want these entering illegal immigrants to respect our laws. Placing them into a clogged bureaucracy that cannot handle their cases hardly instills respect for American law. Some deportation courts have scheduled hearings as far out as four years from now.

Meanwhile, numerous gang members, many of them teenagers from El Salvador, have been reported to be among the "unaccompanied children." Gang members have posed for photographers proudly displaying their gang tattoos. El Salvadorian and Mexican gangs are connected to well-organized cartels involved in drug and gun running, prostitution, extortion, car theft and other criminal activities. They are not prevented from entering the country and they are rarely deported, but when they are deported they easily reenter the country again. The USCCB needs to consider whether "social justice" through an amnesty policy inculcates a respect for the nation's laws.

No End in Sight

A major issue confronting immigration activists and the USCCB is whether an amnesty policy will solve the problems of a porous border. President Obama announced in a press conference recently that in August there was a drop in illegal immigration of unaccompanied children. What he did not mention was that the bigger and faster-growing problem is the inflow of illegal immigrants

defining themselves as “family units.” The number of unaccompanied youth (and let’s stop calling them children, because most of them are teenagers) dropped from July to August. The number of Central Americans crossing in “family units” fell by only a couple of hundred people in August. These “family units” have crossed the border to claim green cards via immigration courts. What constitutes a “family unit” is little more than claiming to be a member of a family. Border officials have to take the word of immigrants that they are family members. Virtual cities of children and families are picking up and fleeing their homes in Mexico and Central America to come to the United States.

The U.S. immigration system, as journalist Brian Resnick wrote in the *National Journal* (6/16/14), is broken. President Obama’s constitutionally suspect executive order for “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” (DACA) encouraged the latest surge. Instead of announcing repeal of this unauthorized program, he seeks to appease his base, immigration activists and the USCCB by issuing another lawless executive order to provide amnesty to the 11 million illegal immigrants now residing in the country—after the November elections, so as not to harm Democrats facing the voters.

Everyone agrees that the “push” factor—poverty, crime and lack of a better future—in Mexico and Central America has created this decades-long problem, which has grown worse in the last decade and a half. Remedying these problems in Central America seems

like an impossible task. The larger problem, the “pull” policies of the United States—easy access to our borders and a failure of deportation policy—is something that can be addressed. The USCCB and activist priests on both sides of the border have been complicit, albeit with good intentions, in creating these “pull” conditions. The bishops need to ask themselves if their complicity really serves the national interests, the well-being of American society, or even the interests of immigrants who are being exploited by organized, violent gangs in crossing the border. Who really benefits in the end?

October sure won’t be the Month of the Rosary in Venezuela!

The Socialist (communist) Party in Venezuela continues to put a blasphemous religious spin on the legacy of the late dictator, Hugo Chavez. Rosaries adorned with Chavez’s face, shrines and images depicting him with a Christian cross are becoming commonplace. They have gone so far as to re-write the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Chavez who art in heaven . . . lead us not into temptation of capitalism.” The Venezuela Roman Catholic Church has strongly criticized “the untouchable prayer for Christians around the world.” President Maduro defends the modification and calls critics “new inquisitors.” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 8/30/14) See the July 2014 *Mindszenty Report* for information on the brutal suppression of anti-government protests in Venezuela.

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