

Get off the fence and support immigration reform

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Some Catholics aren't so sure about the bishops' push for comprehensive immigration reform, but this Catholic activist says it's time for the entire church to stick up for immigrants.

Ask any priest or nun working with Latino immigrants in the United States, and they will tell you that many of their parishioners are living in a state of terror. Then ask them what the larger Catholic community is doing about it, and the answer will likely be: "Damn little!"

Immigration reform died an ugly death in 2007. The professional pushers of addictive resentment and fear—such as Michael Savage and Lou Dobbs—created a toxic anti-immigrant smog that spread over our nation. Bullies rule the land, and decent people are silent.

The result is a shameful regimen of racial profiling, paramilitary abuse of force by out-of-control Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, and the denial of due process to the unlucky immigrants caught up in the backlash against undocumented migrants.

Most important to Catholics is the destruction of families through deportations. In 2008 ICE deported 267,000 undocumented immigrants. The overwhelming majority were simply workers building a life with their families in this land. Our nation has not seen as shameful a spasm of immigrant abuse since "Operation Wetback" deported a million Mexican laborers abruptly deemed redundant after World War II.

While President Obama has thankfully initiated a moratorium on workplace raids, even under his administration the misery continues. The ICE website brags that deportations are up 18 percent nationally over 2008 levels. This despite Obama's oft-stated position that current immigration laws are broken and that a practical, comprehensive reform package is necessary.

Immigration reform is only fair to the thousands of immigrant families who have been whipsawed by our historically capricious treatment of undocumented workers. For decades the United States turned a blind eye to the illegal immigration of Mexican workers across our southern border. Their cheap labor was convenient to powerful farmers, to poultry and meatpacking industries, to restaurant owners, and to all of us who enjoy cheap vegetables.

Now a souring economy means that the "illegal" workers are surplus laborers, and national security demands that we know who is living in our nation.

But rhetorical or real clampdowns on undocumented workers are all show. The owners of the meatpacking companies, farmers, restaurants, manufacturers, or other small businesses that rely on this workforce are rarely prosecuted. And even at a greatly accelerated pace of deportations, it would take some 48 years to deport the estimated 12 million undocumented workers currently in the United States—assuming no one else ever crosses the border.

How well has the U.S. church responded to this cultural and actual assault against undocumented workers? The honest answer would have to be "mixed."

The official position of church leadership has been superb. The U.S. and Mexican bishops jointly issued the pastoral letter [*Strangers No Longer*](#) seven years ago, calling for family unification and a broad legalization program.

As early as 2003 the bishops saw the increasingly ugly tone of the debate: "Alarming, migrants often are treated as criminals. Misperceptions and xenophobic and racist attitudes in both the United States and Mexico contribute to an atmosphere in which undocumented persons are discriminated against and abused."

Grounded in scripture and Catholic social teaching, the pastoral declares that "the human dignity and human rights of undocumented immigrants should be respected."

Since then, the church also has launched the Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform (justiceformigrants.org) to mobilize its institutions and people in the struggle for justice for undocumented migrants.

But the most impressive work is being done by Catholics in the immigrant parishes. As a former lay volunteer with the Catholic Church in Peru and in Panama, I can attest to the profound personal transformation that results from being in real relationships with immigrant workers. Seeing up close the hard work, faith, and dedication to family of poor migrants working in some of the most back-breaking and dangerous jobs in the United States is transformational for Catholics blessed by this opportunity.

It's not an accident that during the mass deportation raids in New Bedford, Massachusetts; Postville, Iowa; and Laurel, Mississippi, it was the Catholic parishes that organized emergency community support and served as the sanctuary for the terrified family members of those arrested. The Catholic communities of these towns and countless others across the land have earned the eternal trust of the immigrant community through their old-fashioned exercise of solidarity.

But after giving credit to our church for work well done, we must also admit to a shameful unwillingness to mobilize the breadth of the Catholic community in support of intelligent immigration reform.

For each Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles or Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island who speaks out fearlessly against attacks on undocumented workers and in support of reform, there are 20 timid bishops who remain mute on the issue. In the affluent parishes where the Catholic corporate and political elites of our land worship, the pulpits on Sundays ring with platitudes rather than thunder with calls to action on behalf of immigrant Catholics.

Collectively, European-descent Catholics have forgotten when we, too, were the strangers in a strange land—the times of "No Irish Need Apply," "WOPs" ("without papers"), "Polacks," and "Bohunks."

And many Catholic efforts in support of immigration reform maintain a safe, antiseptic distance from the immigrant "activist" community.

It doesn't have to be that way. In the United States we respond to broken laws by fixing them. That is why we no longer have slavery, why women can vote, and why blacks and whites can use the same drinking fountains. Our immigration laws are broken, and they need to be fixed to include:

- A continued commitment to family unity as the fundamental basis for migration. Intact families are good for society, and the current emphasis on family reunification (about 70 percent of visas are for family reunification) is completely consistent with Catholic social teaching.
- More legal channels for low-wage workers to come fill the low-skill jobs that the U.S. service economy is creating. Low-wage workers have historically come to the U.S. without visas. Offering more visas would bring this migration under the rule of law, increasing national security.
- Smart enforcement at our borders and workplaces. With low-wage workers able to enter the country legally, measures such as walls built only at strategic points along the border and electronic monitoring at the border and in workplaces will focus scarce law enforcement resources on bad people such as drug smugglers and human traffickers.
- A path to legalization and earned citizenship for the overwhelming majority of the 12 million undocumented who are contributing with their labor and who moved here during the "nod and wink" period of negligible or sporadic immigration enforcement.

This strategy will encourage legal immigration and discourage illegal immigration, freeing up border and other enforcement resources. We'd be able to invest resources in helping immigrants learn English and fully participate in our nation, while also investing in job creation in Mexico to slow the "push" factor in immigration from that nation.

A reasoned debate cannot take place in an atmosphere of intimidation. So it is time for Catholics-and I am including the timid bishops, the pastoral and conflict-averse pastors, and the European-descent Catholics suffering from historical amnesia-to discover our full voice.

We must stand up to the bullies and the naysayers. It is time to show this nation the meaning of solidarity and find the image and likeness of God in our immigrant brothers and sisters, however they appear-or don't appear-on paper.

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