

The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSSC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State: Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of the Archdiocese of Seattle; Bishop Blase J. Cupich of the Diocese of Spokane; Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima; and Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.



Immigration Reform: Seeking Truth in Charity

The Human Face of a Currently Deficient System

After emigrating from the Philippines to the U.S. to pursue better economic opportunities, Joseph and Bernadette petitioned to have their five adult children join them when they became U.S. citizens. After waiting many years, they petitioned again on behalf of their oldest daughter. They are still waiting for her to join them, along with their four other adult children who still reside in the Philippines.

To find work and escape poverty, Francisco's parents brought him to the U.S. when he was a small child. He has become an exemplary leader in youth ministry at his parish. He had to return to Mexico in 2011 in order to comply with the immigration process after his petition for permanent residence was accepted. He has been in Mexico for more than a year waiting for an immigration judge to waive the 10-year penalty he incurred as a child for entering the country illegally, so that his green card can be granted.

These Newcomers are Known to Us

We hear stories like these every day, as we pastor immigrant families living in Washington, a state that has become home to an estimated 230,000 undocumented immigrants. The vast majority of immigrants come here because they are poor and desperately need work to support their families. But they also come because we need their labor. Washington State ranks in the top ten among states that rely on undocumented workers for their workforce. They harvest our produce and crops. They clean our hotel rooms and serve food in our restaurants. They care for our children, tend our lawns, and take on the manual labor we are unable or unwilling to do for ourselves. But they also are professionals – lawyers, physicians, technicians, priests, sisters, mechanics, builders – and even soldiers serving our country. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are employed in virtually every sector of our economy.

But immigrants are much more than affordable labor. They are also our neighbors, our friends, the classmates of our children and our parishioners. Many of the largest parishes in our three dioceses have primarily Hispanic congregations. Each year our Catholic Schools make room and increase the amount of scholarship assistance for immigrant families, and our Catholic Charities offer innovative and helpful programs that provide them with social services and housing. Through the Church's ministry, we encounter

their suffering on a daily basis, suffering caused by a broken immigration system. Through the eyes of those we pastor, we see first-hand how the lack of comprehensive immigration reform results in unequal enforcement of laws, the break-up of families, and the exploitation of laborers -- in abuse at the hands of ruthless smugglers and, tragically, in thousands of deaths in the deserts of the American Southwest during the past two decades.

A Response In Keeping With Our American Heritage

It is out of respect for human dignity, a value at the heart of our discipleship in Christ, but also in keeping with the unique soul and character of America, that we urge elected officials and all citizens to work to end this totally preventable human suffering. In advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, we do not ignore the complexity of the situation or the number of conflicting values. We recognize the full range of national and international economic, political and social causes involved, from the lack of living-wage jobs in nations with stifling international debt to the absence of basic infrastructure to support economic activity; we recognize both our government's responsibility to secure our borders and the great need for workers on the part of American employers.

Yet it is precisely because the situation is so complex that we must choose the promotion of human dignity as the starting point for bringing about a reasonable, humane and comprehensive solution to this broken system. We have it within our means to fix the problems which bring so much suffering to immigrants and which, if left unaddressed, have the potential of separating us from our proud American heritage. For centuries we have boldly proclaimed to the world that we welcome "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," because we measure others by their God-given dignity and the quality of their hopes for the future, not by the circumstances of their birth.

An Honest Assessment

Many raise the concern that immigrant populations place a burden on American taxpayers, take jobs from Americans, and strain our social services. Yet studies show that over time immigrants are net contributors to our economy. American businesses need immigrant labor, and over a lifetime even those who enter the country illegally contribute more to the economy through labor, taxes and purchases than they

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consume in services. Undocumented immigrants are never entitled to government-sponsored health and social services, and even legal immigrants do not qualify for welfare or health care for the first five years of their residency in the U.S. In truth, undocumented workers pay billions each year in sales, income and social security taxes, supporting safety-net services they cannot receive. Comprehensive immigration reform would bring these workers out of the shadows, force them to register, and thus contribute even more to support essential public services than they already pay.

Enforceable and Effective Laws & Worker and Family Protection

We join our brother bishops in the United States in urging continued bi-partisan cooperation for comprehensive immigration reform. We are convinced that the overall benefits of legislation being proposed outweigh the burdens of our current system, which relegates millions to life in the shadows and subjects them to family separation, detention, and exploitation. We favor moving forward legislation that includes the following considerations:

1. The path to citizenship should be made more affordable and accessible for undocumented immigrants and their families. We oppose legislation that eliminates or makes inaccessible a path to citizenship.
2. Family unity should be enhanced in the legal immigration system.
3. A viable and robust program for low-skilled workers to enter and work legally should be included, with appropriate worker protections.
4. An increase in the number of visas should be made available to reduce backlog and help reunify families. Such a measure would not only be more compassionate but would promote immigration in a safe, legal and controlled manner, freeing resources needed to enforce border security measures aimed at drug and human traffickers, smugglers and would-be terrorists.

5. Reform must include both adequate border security and protection for the due process rights of immigrants.
6. The root causes of migration should be addressed through changes in U.S. trade policy, strategic investments in international economic aid, debt relief and other initiatives which would reduce the number of people forced to migrate in order to survive.

We Invite You To Partner With Us

Some Catholics and others may question how comprehensive immigration reform impacts the rule of law. The U.S. immigration system is deficient for everyone: taxpayers, employers and immigrants alike. We, the Catholic Bishops of Washington State, support the rule of law and the need for just laws in a civilized society. In our view, comprehensive immigration reform will restore the rule of law by creating an immigration system that facilitates legal entry and presence. Our current system fails to do that sufficiently to meet our nation's security, economic and social needs.

People like Joseph and Bernadette came to the U.S. in search of economic opportunities and have followed the rules, yet the system prevents them from uniting their family. Francisco is a victim of circumstances arising from his parents' undocumented migration to the U.S. when he was a small child. Long waiting times could keep him separated from his family, friends and community for many years while he pursues legal status.

The time has come for comprehensive reform of our deficient system. We urge our fellow Catholics and all citizens in Washington State to contact their U.S. senators and representatives and urge them to support humane immigration reform. Working together in a spirit of compassion, we can — and must — create a system that promotes human dignity, enhances respect for our nation's laws, and reflects our proud heritage as a nation of immigrants.

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