

May 1, 2007

Faith and Policy

Let's treat immigrants with dignity and respect

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Last year the country witnessed astounding television and newspaper images of millions of Americans protesting "enforcement only" immigration legislation passed by Congress. Some say the protests were the largest since the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Those images are set to return this week with rallies planned across Metro Detroit and other parts of the country in support of comprehensive immigration reform. Regardless of the size of the rallies, the message in this debate is clear: Immigrants are people who deserve to be treated with respect and human dignity.

The Catholic Church has historically taken a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects the human dignity of those seeking new lives in the United States. Few will oppose the argument that existing policy has led to the undermining of such dignity, the death of thousands of people, the separation of families and the influx of unauthorized people in this country.

Border policies don't work

To compound the problem, our nation's border enforcement strategies have been ineffective. In fact, from 1993-2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled. Yet, the number of unauthorized arrivals has doubled.

A strong argument could even be made that existing border control policy has simply resulted in migrants discovering more remote border crossings, which has led to the growth of smugglers and traffickers, increased fatalities and a decrease in apprehensions.

While the church believes in strong border security and a legal path toward citizenship, it also believes no border enforcement strategy will be effective until a new policy addresses the reasons migrants come in the first place.

From a globalization perspective, both the United States and Mexico have recognized the integration of economic interests through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was intended to help under-developed nations improve not only their economies but also their citizens' standard of living.

NAFTA's failure

Seeing last year's protests leads one to believe that NAFTA clearly has failed in this aspect. Millions of people living in poverty, despair and economic oppression flee to the United States in the hope of a new life, for better living conditions and for a brighter future.

How many people in this mindset are going to let a wall stop their progress? And who can blame them?

Comprehensive immigration legislation, which may resurface in Congress in the coming weeks, recognizes that the system is badly broken.

Such measures do not create "amnesty" as some have asserted. Rather, the legislation creates an avenue for earned citizenship that includes application fees and fines, rigorous criminal background checks and security screenings.

The Catholic bishops of Michigan, who are urging immigration reform this year, recognize that immigrants, like all persons, possess an inherent human dignity that must be respected.

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