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Bishops applaud Senate immigration bill despite some concerns

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Immigration and the Church

Describing immigration reform as an issue "that is very close to the heart of the church and the country," Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York and two fellow bishops spoke Monday with media about proposed immigration legislation, thanking the U.S. senators who brought the legislation forward while outlining some concerns with what they proposed.

Dolan, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, and Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City repeatedly thanked the Senate's "Gang of Eight" for their courage and leadership in addressing immigration reform. Gomez said the plan includes many of the elements the bishops have espoused for immigration reform in the past.

"This is much, much more than a political issue. It's a human issue," said Wester, chair of the bishops' communications committee and consultant to the migration committee.

"We look forward to working closely with [the senate] to achieve the fairest legislation possible," Dolan said.

Still, they expressed concerns with some of the aspects of the proposed reform. Those included its exclusivity and the timeline to citizenship. Gomez said the bishops would like to see the application costs and the time to receive a green card reduced, and for the citizenship to be a possibility in no more than 10 years.

The "Gang of Eight" bill outlines [1] a 13-year path to citizenship, with a $500 fee for provisional immigration status, as well as assessed taxes.

Gomez, chair of the bishops' migration committee, also called for the legislation to do more to keep families intact.

In terms of border security, the bishops advocated those parameters occur simultaneously with the legalization process. Currently, the bill requires a series of security triggers ? from implementation plans for security and fencing, to the establishment of e-verification and exit systems ? be in place before people can begin applying for provisional immigrant status.

Dolan fought back against the caricature of bishops against any immigration control, saying that their concern is that a secure border is achieved in a way that is fair and just, and that policies also look toward the root causes of immigration. He suggested reallocating funds set aside for a fence to help other nations' economies in a way that would reduce the need for immigration as an option at all.

Responding to immigration critics questioning the timing of this bill in light of the Boston Marathon bombing, Dolan said connecting the two was an irrational argument.

"To demean [immigrants] because of the vicious tragic action of two people is illogical," he said, pointing toward fears that accompanied the Irish when they immigrated to the U.S. in the 1840s.

Continuing to connect history to the present, Dolan lauded the church's longstanding commitment to immigrants and their struggles, as well as its track record of helping immigrants assimilate to their new homeland, through parishes but also various Catholic organizations.

"The Catholic church has been on the forefront of welcoming the immigrant but also helping them get settled," he said.

"That's what we do ? helping the parishioners to come together and be a part of our country," Gomez said.

The bishops pointed to integration ? highlighting Catholic schools' role in the process ? as one way to allay fears often associated with immigration. Dolan cited a recent meeting with Muslim leaders interested in how the church succeeded in assimilating into the U.S. culture.

The bishops expressed optimism that real reform could emerge from this latest legislative push, but were not naïve to the fact that it will be a long, tiring fight. Kevin Appleby, director of the bishops' office of migration policy and public affairs, estimated a timeline that could see legislation occur as early as the end of the summer.

If legislation does come to pass, the three prelates hoped it would come as a comprehensive and not piecemeal package.

"How much more can we delay it?" Wester said. "I think we really have to have a sense of urgency."

"We can't wait any longer to reform a system that's broken, unjust and unfair," Dolan said.

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