News

An older white man with a beard and glasses wears a red zucchetto and a brown tunic

Boston Cardinal Seán O’Malley speaks on the challenges of migration and immigration at The Catholic University of America's School of Canon Law in Washington March 22, 2023. (OSV News photo/Rui Barros, The Catholic University of America)

Kurt Jensen

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — March 24, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A political climate hostile to the needs and existence of immigrants is not only morally wrong, it also weakens the structures of democratic governments, said Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston.

"As a nation of immigrants, we should seek a sense of identification with other immigrants trying to enter the country," O'Malley reminded his audience March 22 in delivering the James H. Provost Lecture at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

For the cardinal, this identification began in 1973 when he founded Centro Católico Hispano (Hispanic Catholic Center) in Washington, an organization providing assistance, including legal help, to immigrants.

"I didn't celebrate Mass in English until I became a bishop in the Virgin Islands (in 1984)," he observed. But even then, O'Malley found himself celebrating Masses late at night on cruise ships for their Filipino crew members.

"Our immigrant population contributes mightily to the economy and the well-being of this country," he added, and is a major challenge to Catholic social teaching.

Further, "States have an obligation to provide reasonable responses to immigration," O'Malley said. "280 million migrants (worldwide) conveys the scope of the problem."

Migration by those escaping poverty and violence, such as what has occurred in Venezuela, "is one of the best examples of what are called transnational problems" not controlled by state boundaries, he said.

But it requires a type of cooperation that so far is evasive, the cardinal said, since "no manner of political authority exists as a global government."

Guidance for the responsibilities of nations exists, he pointed out, in Catholic social teaching, especially about the dignity of the person. "A shared dignity is the basis of the equality of persons," he said, transcending ethnicity and wealth.

Advertisement

"Human rights flow directly from human dignity," but, O'Malley concluded, "The moral claims of immigrants may provide more demands than the current legal system provides."

In reference to the U.S. political climate, he said, "These divisions are most intense between Congress and the executive branch. The division is in plain sight to the country as a whole."

O'Malley, a Capuchin friar named archbishop of Boston in 2003 and a cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, has been consistent in his criticism of national immigration policy across Democratic and Republican administrations.

In April 2014, celebrating a special Mass in the Arizona desert, the cardinal distributed holy Communion to the faithful through the slats in the 20-foot-high fence on the U.S.-Mexican border.

"We have lost a sense of responsibility to our brothers and sisters,'' he said in his homily.

In a 2019 op-ed in the Boston Globe, he wrote, "our policies on Central America seem exclusively focused on threats, coercion, and punishment. This is surely misguided."

Last September, when Gov. Ron DeSantis, R-Fla., unexpectedly flew a group of South American migrants to Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts with a vague promise they would have jobs there, O'Malley said in a statement, "In our country, a broken immigration system requires immediate reform. From the (young immigrants covered by the DREAM Act) who still seek legal stability in their lives, to those fleeing war in Ukraine, poverty in Latin America and Africa, or crises in the Middle East, the call of our common humanity will be with us for years to come."

The cardinal's themes on migration have dovetailed with those emphasized by Pope Francis, who taught in his 2018 teaching "Gaudete et Exsultate" ("Rejoice and Be Glad") that Catholics were not to treat the plight of migrants as "a secondary issue compared to the 'grave' bioethical questions."

The Holy Father said this view is not right for a Christian, "for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children."