

'Toxic politics' prevent immigration reform

Jerry Filteau | Nov. 5, 2009



A nun holds up a sign during an immigration rally in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington Oct. 13. Thousands of people came to Capitol Hill for a day of lobbying and an afternoon rally calling for comprehensive immigration reform. (CNS/Bob Roller)

WASHINGTON -- "A toxic political atmosphere" is preventing much-needed humane reform of the "broken immigration system" in the United States, Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick said Nov. 3 at a forum on immigration and human dignity at Georgetown University.

Calling for "comprehensive immigration reform," the retired Washington archbishop said, "We have to change what is broken, lest more people will suffer. We have to be courageous and persistent and change the system."

McCarrick was lead speaker of a three-member panel at the forum, put on by Georgetown's Woodstock Theological Center and co-sponsored by CLINIC (Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.), the Migration Policy Institute and the Jesuit Conference, USA. More than 300 people attended.

In one way or another all the speakers urged new attention to immigration reform -- which McCarrick bluntly said is now on a political back burner to the more currently dominant issues of the economic crisis, U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the health care reform debate.

The golden opportunity for immigration reform two years ago is gone, and those seeking comprehensive, humane reform need to watch closely for the next open window and seize it, he said.

"Our receptivity to immigrants defines who we are" as Americans, said Donald M Kerwin Jr., a Woodstock Center associate fellow and vice president for programs of the Migration Policy Institute. "What immigrants want today is what your parents and grandparents wanted" as immigrants in previous generations.

Kerwin, who for 15 years was director of CLINIC, a national program established by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to provide legal assistance to refugees, asylum seekers and other immigrants seeking visas and legal residency in the United States, sharply disputed the use of "illegal aliens" or "illegal immigrants" as terms defining or identifying those who enter the country without legal status.

"The rejection of 'illegal alien' is not a quibble. ... It's a line drawn in the sand" to say that these are human beings with rights and legitimate aspirations, whose illegal entry does not define who they are, he said.

Rounding out the panel was Octavio Gonzalez, a 1996 Georgetown graduate, currently legal assistant for the Stanford Law School Immigrants' Rights Clinic, who brought the rubber to the road with his story of his own parents' initially illegal immigration and eventual path to legalization under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

The 1986 law expanded the U.S. Border Patrol (now part of Homeland Security) and created penalties for employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants, but it provided a path for amnesty to about 3 million illegal immigrants then in the United States.

Gonzalez said his father, the third-oldest of 12 children in a poor rancher-farmer family from the town of El Teul de Gonzalez Ortega in Zacatecas state in Mexico, crossed the U.S. border illegally in 1969 to find employment that would let him help support his family.

His mother, from the same town, obtained a U.S. visa when she was 19, but a border agent turned her back on grounds that she might overstay her visa, so she entered the U.S. illegally a few days later -- her goal, to earn enough money to help her parents buy a home in Mexico to retire in.

Neither of his parents, who met in Los Angeles, originally intended to stay in the United States, he said. They returned to Mexico in the late 1970s and married there in 1979.

"As much as they wanted to stay with their families in Mexico, it was becoming clear to them that their aspirations for their children would not be possible living in Mexico," he said, so they returned to Los Angeles in 1979, working and starting to raise a family.

Gonzalez said when the 1986 immigration reform allowed his parents to obtain legal residency, his father described it as "bringing our family out to the light of day."

He quoted his father: "I could now stand at the bus stop without being afraid that I would be picked up by the police. I was no longer afraid to walk into government buildings. I was no longer afraid to own a car. ... I could own a home like everyone else. ... When [the government] legalized me, it recognized me as a human being."

"America is a country of immigrants and has embraced my parents and gave them an opportunity to come out of the shadows and mend their status," Gonzalez said. I can go on all night about the benefits that legalization has imparted on my mom and dad and on my family. Today there are 12 million people living in the United States that remain in the shadows."

McCarrick highlighted the attitude followers of Christ should have toward immigrants, starting with God's admonishment to the Israelites in Leviticus: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt."

In the New Testament, he said, the child Jesus and his parents "flee as refugees to Egypt to escape the threat of Herod. As an adult, Jesus is an itinerant preacher. ... Christ lived as a migrant and a refugee for a reason: in order to live with his people in solidarity, to provide an example."

"So, in Catholic teaching, in the face of the immigrant, the refugee, the asylum-seeker or the trafficking victim, we see the face of Christ," he said.

He quoted Pope Benedict XVI: "Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental,

inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance."

Acting on that "simple but powerful" principle, he said, Catholics across the nation should be working "to convince our public officials to heed this principle and to enact humane immigration reform."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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