

Bishop to Congress: 'Immigration is humanitarian issue'

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Kincanas meets with media on Capitol Hill May, 2010 (CNS photo)

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Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told lawmakers on Capitol Hill that the problem of immigration should not be dissected as an economic issue, but as a humanitarian one.

Bishop Kicanas made the remarks July 14 before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law.

"The current immigration law we have today fails to meet the moral test of dignity to the human person," said Bishop Kicanas, whose diocese runs along the whole of the Arizona-Mexico border. Referring to a tough new law passed April 23 in Arizona but not expected to take effect until July 29, he said it was "only providing a Band-Aid unless new federal laws are made."

He made a clear distinction between those coming to the United States to work and those coming to do the nation harm.

"From a moral perspective, we cannot accept the toil of immigrants without providing them protection," Bishop Kicanas said.

The testimony the bishop delivered made several points about what comprehensive immigration reform should include.

A new immigration law should "honor the rule of law and help restore it by requiring 11 million undocumented (immigrants) to pay a fine, pay back taxes, learn English and get in the back of the line," the bishop said. "We believe this (is) a proportionate penalty."

The bishop said federal law should be enforced and those who do not uphold the law should be held accountable.

Bishop Kicanas said immigration reform would help to make the nation more secure and focused on "those coming who intend to do us harm."

Others who testified at the hearing included the Rev. Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Mathew Staver, dean of Liberty University's School of Law; and James Edwards, fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies.

All of these men, from different religious and political viewpoints, came to a unanimous conclusion that the policy Congress should adopt for new immigrants must include an English competency requirement and a means to ensure them an earned pathway to legal status.

They disagreed, however, on the best solution for the 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

Bishop Kicanas said that at minimum one measure would be a temporary residence program for the undocumented immigrants living in the United States to "force them to come out of the shadows."

The matter of immigrants' family ties being broken by immigration policy was often debated.

Committee member Rep. Dan Lungren, R-Calif., asked the bishop his view on separating immigrant families, specifically those who take part in immigrant worker programs.

Bishop Kicanas said he was basing his answer on what the church teaches, that is families must be kept together.

Lungren responded, "So they should be treated better than our men and women in the Armed Forces who are separated from their families?" The bishop replied that the two family situations were not analogous.

Shortly after Lungren's question, Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., pointed out a 2007 case in which a U.S. Navy man, Eduardo Gonzalez, who will be serving on his third tour on the USS Harry Truman in the Persian Gulf, faced a similar situation.

Gonzalez's wife, who is not a U.S. citizen, is under investigation and is facing deportation to Guatemala.

On the subject of deportation in general, Bishop Kicanas said that the church would support the judicial decision to deport some individuals but would not agree with a mass deportation.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, accused Republicans of blocking immigration reform.

"You can fly with the eagles and not get Republicans to get past the political schisms (against immigration reform) they have," she said.

Putting perspective on the need for the day's hearing, Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., said that "people of faith can stop the political bickering" by focusing on what the real issue is -- ultimately a moral and ethical one, he said.

Gutierrez and several other committee members expressed an interest in having further talks with the panelists.

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