

LA bishops: US immigration system 'immoral'

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Immigration and the Church



Archbishop Jose H. Gomez addresses the media during a press conference at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles April 6. Cardinal Roger M. Mahony stands to his left. (CNS photo/Tim Rue)

LOS ANGELES -- In speeches the same day, Los Angeles' cardinal and its coadjutor archbishop talked about immigration in the United States, with one calling some of the rhetoric about the issue "not worthy of the Gospel," and the other saying the current system "is an immoral system that thrives upon the weakness and suffering of those without a voice."

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony told an audience at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill Feb. 2 that the ethical injunctions of Scripture require "compassion for the stranger, the alien, and the worker. Whatever economic, political or social policies we discuss -- and whatever discussion of constitutional rights and liberties -- we cannot turn our backs to this biblical legacy of hope."

Taking up the question of whether undocumented immigrants are good for the economy, Mahony traced the roots of the word economy to its Greek origins, where the principal focus was not monetary but how a household is ordered.

"God's household, God's grand economy, is one in which holiness and truth, justice and love, and above all, peace ... prevail," the cardinal said. "In my view, what makes for a good economy is the full flourishing of everyone who is part of God's economy, household or community."

He said that no other commitments can trump the biblical tradition of compassion for the stranger, the alien and the worker.

"Whatever economic, political or social policies we discuss -- and whatever discussion of constitutional rights and liberties -- we cannot turn our backs to this biblical legacy of hope," he said.

To see all of *NCR*'s coverage of immigration, see our new blog: [Immigration and the Church](#) [1].

Speaking the same day in Naples, Fla., to Legatus, a Catholic business leaders organization, Coadjutor Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles also drew on Scripture to explain that "the church's approach to immigration -- like the church's approach to every social issue -- is never about politics. It is about preaching the good news of God's love for all peoples. It is about transforming the city of man into the family of God."

As coadjutor, Gomez will take over as head of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles when Mahony retires, which is expected to be in late February.

Noting he is among those who are bothered by the illegal immigration status of some people, the archbishop said, "I don't like it when our rule of law is flouted. And I support just and appropriate punishments."

However, he added, "right now, we are imposing penalties that leave wives without husbands, children without parents. We are deporting fathers and leaving single mothers to raise children on little to no income.

"We are a better people than that. We have always been a nation of justice and law," said Gomez. "But we have also been a nation of mercy and forgiveness. We can find a better way. It begins in seeing immigrants as human beings. As mothers and fathers. As children of God."

Gomez said that as an immigrant from Mexico himself, he understands well that "family means everything for Hispanics," who make up the majority of new immigrants. "The Hispanic idea of community is a family of families -- great grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. And always, family is connected to the Catholic Church and to God."

That's why current enforcement policies "workplace raids, detentions and deportations are such a humanitarian tragedy," he said. "We are destroying families in the name of enforcing our laws."

In his speech in North Carolina, Mahony told stories of families torn apart by immigration enforcement -- including that of three North Carolina children left by the side of the road for nine hours after their Honduran undocumented immigrant mother was taken away for not having a driver's license.

He also described his own experience of an immigration raid at his family's chicken processing plant when he was a child.

"It was an extremely terrifying and intimidating moment for those employees, all of whom had papers," he said. "I will never forget the terror that those men with their guns created in the workplace that day.

"These are American stories," he said. "Do these stories reflect who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to be remembered by future generations? Is this who we are at our best? In a word, no."

After elaborating on the economic model of God's household, the cardinal said that in Catholic thought people don't serve the economy, the economy serves humanity, "so that each person and his or her family can live in dignity and without want and can move, if needed, to find the place of hope."

"Our laws should be configured to ensure that even the low-skilled laborer, who sits at the bottom of the economic ladder, reaps the fruits of their labor in dignity and with full rights in the society," he said.

As today's system operates, however, "we accept their labor, their separation from family, their taxes, and their purchasing power, yet we do not offer the undocumented population the protection of our laws," said Mahony.

"To restore order to God's household, we must ensure that all are welcome to the table," he said, meaning immigration reforms that protect those on the margins of the economy.

Calling current immigration laws unjust, the cardinal said society gladly accepts the toil and taxes of the immigrant work force, "but look the other way when they are exploited in the workplace, die in the desert, or are arrested and deported for the most minor of civil violations, like jaywalking.

"When convenient politically, we scapegoat the immigrant without acknowledging our complicity," he said.

He noted that of the nearly half million immigrants who enter the country without permission or stay beyond the limits of their visas, nearly 90 percent get jobs within six months, but there are only 5,000 visas available annually by which they might come in legally.

"This is a disordered system," he said. "hardly the arrangement of a household according to a plan where there is room enough for all at the table."

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