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Keeping Immigration Front & Center

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Distinctly Catholic

Ever since the Republicans took over the House, and the Tea Party took over the Republican Party, the prospect for comprehensive immigration reform has looked more grim than usual. As long as the recession continues and millions of Americans remain out-of-work, immigration reform is a tough sell: Provisions for guest workers aren't popular when your wife or your uncle or your neighbor has been looking for work and can't find any.

Next Monday, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is sponsoring an all-day symposium on immigration with the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, the in-house "think tank" of Catholic University. The daytime panels are free and open to the public. In the evening, Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles will speak on the topic of immigration as will the Archbishop of Tijuana, Rafael Munoz. This event is not open to the public because of limited seating, but NCR's own Tom Roberts will be covering it.

Full Disclosure: I am work at IPRCS these days helping to organize events like this, so I have an interest in its succeeding. But, I also have deeper interests in the success of this event, interests we all share as American Catholics. First, on the merits, the issue is an important one and we cannot let it recede into the background of our civic debate. Secondly, one of the things that is most admirable about the Church is that the public policy positions we take are so rooted in a deep, long-standing intellectual tradition, that we have the capacity to continually remind our culture: We are not going to stop talking about this.

First, the merits. The current immigration system is manifestly not working, unless you are an unscrupulous employer who wants to exploit cheap immigrant labor. Nor will efforts to strengthen border security suffice: many immigrants come here on legal visas and simply overstay the time limit. Only comprehensive reform will work.

More importantly, we are a nation of immigrants. The Tea Party crowd likes to talk about American exceptionalism, but they neglect to mention that the vibrant role of immigrants in shaping America is a key part of what makes America exceptional. In America, it doesn't matter where you come from. What matters is what you bring to our culture. America is a greater nation, a richer nation, it has a more interesting culture, because we have constantly added immigrants to our social fabric.

More importantly still, as Catholics, this issue is, for us, a no-brainer. We are fighting for our own people when we fight for a better life for immigrants. It has been so ever since Archbishop John Hughes defended Irish immigrants in the mid-1800s. It has been so ever since Cardinal Gibbons stood by the rights of immigrant workers in the late 1800s. It is so, today, when the majority of immigrants are fellow Catholics from Latin America. Part of the American genius is that we transcend tribalism, but that does not mean we can allow anyone to take advantage of our own.

One of the most interesting things about Archbishop Gomez is that when he discusses immigration he frames it squarely as a pro-life and pro-family issue. This throws a bit of a monkey wrench into the ideologies of both political parties. (That is always a good thing!) But, this framing of the issue is not the result of "market research" and it has not been tested by a focus group. This framing of the issue is advanced by Archbishop Gomez because it is true. One of the ugliest consequences of our current policy is that it separates wives from their husbands and children from their parents. It is un-American and unchristian to separate families. The immigration issue is, at its root, a profound moral issue and Gomez is right to insist on a humane policy.

There is one other aspect of Archbishop Gomez's framing of this issue that warrants attention. In his new home state of California, a majority of children are Latinos. In Texas, 86% of the population growth in that state since 2000 has been among minorities. Indeed, even though the GOP controls the entire re-districting process, it looks like two and perhaps three of the four new congressional districts will end up in Democratic hands because of the explosion of the Latino population in the Lone Star State. These new Texas need to be registered to vote and the Church needs to educate them on the issues. There is no reason they cannot join the Republican Party but insist that the GOP halt its hostility to immigrants and become more in tune with the social justice imperatives set out in Pope Benedict's encyclical Caritas in Veritate. There is no reason they can't join the Democratic Party but insist that the Dems become more attuned to the need to give justice and legal protection to the unborn. Given the anti-immigrant hostility of today's GOP, I think it is a stretch to assume these Latinos will join the ranks of the Republicans. But, there is nothing to prevent Latinos from becoming a dominant, pro-life force in the Texas Democratic Party.

On this St. Patrick's Day, I am especially mindful of my Irish forebears who came to this country in the nineteenth century. I am glad they came. I am proud of my Irish heritage just as I am proud of my American citizenship. The two do not conflict. But, when I think of the immigration issue, I think primarily of the many immigrants I worked with over the years in the restaurant business. They were mostly Latinos and Bosnians. They worked their tails off to provide for their families. I do not know if their papers were "legit" and, frankly, I don't care. They were "legit" as human beings and as co-workers. They came here for the same reasons my great-grandparents came here, because they saw America as a place of opportunity and hope. Shame on us if we fail to stand by them.

Which leads to the second important reason to attend the immigration event at CUA next Monday. Political issues come and go. But, some issues stay on the public radar because enough of us insist that they stay on the radar. The abortion issue was not "settled" by Roe because enough of us Catholics refuse to acquiesce in the horrible provisions, or accept the terrible consequences, of that decision. We must be just

as stiff-necked, just as relentless, on the issue of immigration reform. If we continue to make noise about it, if we continue to clamor for a more just treatment of immigrants, if we continue to ask our political leaders to address the issue, in time, we will see progress.

Sometimes, politicians just want certain issues to go away. We cannot let the immigration issue go away. In retrospect, I wish President Obama has tried to push immigration reform harder at the beginning of his term. He is well advised to send to Congress now the exact same immigration bill George W. Bush sent up in 2005, to take the partisan sting out of the issue as much as possible. But, our duty as Catholics is clear. We must keep making noise. We must keep making our arguments in the public square. We must continue to stand, as we have always stood, by the immigrants who have made, and continue to make, America an exceptional nation.

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