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Bishop: Welcoming the stranger essential to faith

by Laura Kilgus by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- The Diocese of Providence was built upon and prospered because of the faith, sacrifices and contributions of many ethnic communities, Bishop Thomas J. Tobin explained during a recent symposium on "Immigrants and Immigration in the 21st Century" at Brown University.

"Throughout its history in our nation and in this community, the church has welcomed and ministered to the historic immigration of these cultures," the bishop said.

"Despite the various languages, cultures and traditions of these very diverse immigrant groups, they were united by a common Christian faith and the desire to improve their lives and contribute to the well-being of their new home in the United States and the state of Rhode Island," he said in the symposium's keynote speech.

He emphasized that the Catholic Church has been concerned with the immigration question and responding to the needs of the immigrant community for a long time and added that the church has continued to be blessed and enriched by the immigrant community.

According the U.S. Census Bureau, 133,000 Rhode Island residents are foreign-born. According to the Pew Center, 20,000-30,000 of the state's foreign-born residents are unauthorized immigrants.

The daylong symposium at Brown allowed researchers, faith leaders and policymakers to come together as a community to discuss local views and attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy in the state in hopes to work toward a greater awareness of the issue.

Across the country almost every state is grappling with the immigration issue. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 46 states and the District of Columbia enacted 208 laws last year that

dealt with immigration and refugees.

In his remarks, Bishop Tobin drew on the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter about welcoming the stranger, explaining that it is essential to the Catholic faith.

"Without condoning undocumented migration, the church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education and social services, no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country, and it works for the human dignity of all -- especially those who find themselves in desperate circumstances," Bishop Tobin shared.

"We also recognize and assert that all human persons, created as they are in the image of God, possess a fundamental dignity that gives rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life."

Bishop Tobin called for fair, effective and comprehensive immigration reform and encouraged respectful and productive discourse, avoiding stereotyping of either side.

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"The footprints of the historic immigrant church in this community, as they are throughout our nation, are all around us," he said. "The church continues to welcome, work with and be blessed by the immigrants coming to our nation and state. It is a phenomenon we shouldn't fear or reject, but rather welcome and embrace."

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