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Catholic university presidents: US immigration system undermines nation's best values

by Joshua J. McElwee

Immigration and the Church

Washington — The leaders of more than a third of the nation's 244 Catholic colleges and universities have called on Congress to pass immigration reform, saying the country's current treatment of immigrants is "morally indefensible."

The heads of more than 90 Catholic institutions of higher learning made the call in a letter to the 135 of the 434 members of the House of Representatives who are Catholic, including Republican House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

"Together we represent universities that educate more than 260,000 students," the university presidents wrote. "Our broken immigration system, which tears parents from children, traps aspiring Americans in the shadows, and undermines the best values of this nation, is morally indefensible."

The letter, set to be announced on a conference call Thursday, was made public Wednesday on the website of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), a Washington-based organization that represents most of the institutions.

Endorsement of immigration reform from the Catholic academics comes as members of the House are considering the immigration reform measure the Senate passed last month.

That bill would expand provisions for approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants and provide a "pathway to citizenship" as long as a series of new measures for security on the U.S.-Mexico border, including addition of some 40,000 border patrol agents, are first arranged.

President Barack Obama said in a number of interviews Tuesday that the House is unlikely to pass the bill before its annual August recess. Several groups of protesters have gathered outside the Capitol this week in Washington's record-setting heat to oppose the measure.

"We hope that as you face intense political pressure from powerful interest groups, you will draw wisdom and moral courage from our shared faith tradition," the university presidents wrote in their letter.

"Catholic teaching values the human dignity and worth of all immigrants, regardless of legal status," they wrote. "We remind you that no human being made in the image of God is illegal."

Others who signed the letter include ACCU president Michael Galligan-Stierle and about 60 of the nation's most prominent theologians, including the heads of the two major U.S. theological societies, the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society.

Two former U.S. ambassadors to the Holy See also signed the letter: Thomas Melady, former president of Sacred Heart University in Connecticut who served in the role in during the administration of President George H.W. Bush, and Miguel Diaz, a theologian at the University of Dayton who stepped down in November.

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The U.S. bishops have voiced their support for immigration reform in a number of recent statements and letters. Several prelates addressed the matter at a press conference in June at the bishops' annual spring meeting, breaking a tradition of treating that meeting like a retreat.

"Each day in our parishes, social service programs, hospitals and schools, we witness the human consequences of a broken immigration system," Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, chairman of the bishops' committee on migration, said then.

"Families are separated, migrant workers are exploited, and our fellow human beings die in the desert," Gomez said. "Simply put, the status quo is morally unacceptable. This suffering must end."

At the end of the letter, the academics asked the politicians to "reject the false choices and divisive rhetoric that have too often characterized this debate."

"Protecting our borders and creating an earned path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in this country are not competing interests," they wrote.

"Please be assured of our prayers as you put prudence, human dignity, and the common good at the center of your deliberations."

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