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University presidents: Immigration reform a 'moral obligation'

by Joshua J. McElwee

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Washington — Catholics unsure of the need for comprehensive immigration reform might consider reflecting on the novel, play and film *Les Misérables*, said John Garvey, president of The Catholic University of America.

Referring to Jean Valjean, the protagonist in Victor Hugo's 19th-century story who is pursued through his life for stealing a loaf of bread, Garvey said: "At some point, we've got to let those transgressions go."

"At some point in your own human understanding, you realize we don't pursue people for all their lives for something they may have done to pursue a better life for their families," he said.

Garvey, whose Washington-based university calls itself the national university of the Catholic church in America, made his comments Thursday on a conference call with presidents of three of the nation's other prominent Catholic universities.

The call, hosted by the nonprofit advocacy group Faith in Public Life, was meant to call attention to a letter signed by more than 90 presidents of U.S. Catholic institutions of higher learning calling on Congress to pass immigration reform.

That letter, which the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities released Wednesday, says the country's current treatment of immigrants is "morally indefensible."

The other presidents on Thursday's call included: Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame; Daniel Curran, president of the University of Dayton in Ohio; and Mary Lyons, president

of the University of San Diego.

The immigration reform measure the Senate passed last month that is now under consideration in the House of representatives " will probably not be perfect. But we can't wait," Lyons said. "It's our moral obligation to act."

Wednesday's letter was addressed to all Catholic members of the House, including both Republican House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

Mentioning the number of Congress members who are Catholic -- 135 of the 434 members of the House -- Stephen Schneck, moderator of Thursday's call and director of Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, said the presidents have influence.

"When more than 90 Catholic college and university president speak up on the most urgent legislative issue facing lawmakers ... you can bet that this message will be heard on Capitol Hill," Schneck said.

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Also on Thursday's call was Diego Sanchez, a graduate of St. Thomas University in Miami who identified himself as an undocumented immigrant from Argentina.

"As I want to fully contribute to shape America's future, so do my family and friends," Sanchez said.

Referring to the number of undocumented immigrants reported to be in the U.S., he continued: "This is about 11 million families who risk deportation and the destruction of their families."

Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, voiced appreciation for the presidents' letter.

"They are a welcome voice in this debate, as they see the potential and talent in newly arriving immigrants," he said. "Immigrants, especially youth, are important for our nation's future and competitiveness. Educators understand the importance of investing in immigrant youth so they can become tomorrow's leaders."

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