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The summer of immigration groundwork: working toward passing a new law

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Aug. 29, 2013
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Members of Congress may be out of town and immigration reform legislation may be stuck until at least this fall, but the summer recess has been time for Catholic activists to rally their forces and pressure elected representatives.

During the first weekend after Labor Day in some dioceses, priests have been asked to preach, celebrate special Masses or hold other events to educate about the church's position on comprehensive immigration reform. Catholic colleges and universities are being asked to do the same the last weekend in September.

In addition, a conference hosted by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, known as CLINIC, was scheduled just outside of Washington for late September. It will focus on the next step, offering help in planning for the process of mass legalization, a component of the Senate-passed immigration reform bill.

The House could take up that bill this fall, but more likely, the Republican-majority will attempt to pass a series of piecemeal bills dealing with immigration rather than consider the Democratic-majority Senate's measure.

Throughout the summer a series of local, regional and national efforts to pass the Senate bill have targeted Catholic members of the House, in particular, and laid the groundwork for increased activity in the fall.

The Nuns on the Bus tour revved up again in May and June, taking religious women on a 6,500-mile trip through 15 states. Over the course of 53 events in 40 cities, stretching from the Northeast across the South and to California, the sisters and others who joined them along the way talked about the need for a comprehensive approach to immigration reform. Gatherings of as many as several hundred people were held in church halls, congressional offices, social service agencies and at a Mexican border crossing.

In a more localized pilgrimage for immigration reform, Sacramento, Calif., Bishop Jaime Soto on Aug. 12 blessed 11 pilgrims who were walking the 285 miles from Sacramento to Bakersfield, holding events along the way to talk about immigration. The 21-day Pilgrimage for a Pathway to Citizenship, planned by PICO National Network, a faith-based community organizing group, started at Sacramento's National Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe and has been making its way from one (mostly Catholic) church to another across central California's agricultural valleys.

After talking to the public and trying to meet with members of Congress as they travel, the pilgrims planned to end their trek Monday at a rally that organizers expect will draw up to 5,000 people.

On the other side of the country, the Washington-based organization Faith in Public Life has spent the summer building coalitions at Catholic colleges and universities to work for immigration reform through letters, postcards and texts to members of Congress.

In July, more than 100 presidents of Catholic higher education institutions, joined by dozens more faculty members, wrote to Catholic members of Congress about the church's teaching on migration in an effort organized by Faith in Public Life in collaboration with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.

"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 said.

"Catholic teaching values the human dignity and worth of all immigrants, regardless of legal status," it continued. "We remind you that no human being made in the image of God is illegal. The Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church warns against the exploitation of immigrant workers and says 'immigrants are to be received as persons and helped, together with their families, to become a part of societal life.' We are part of an immigrant church in an immigrant nation."

John Gehring, Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, told Catholic News Service that the effort to target Catholics in Congress -- including House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and about 135 others -- is "a work in progress."

Pelosi sent a reply -- the only one received so far, Gehring said -- saying the church's call for immigration reform is not only rooted in Catholic teaching but in the nation's history.

She said such fundamental beliefs shared by the university presidents and many Catholics "reflect the character of the American people and the message of so many faiths; to cherish the dignity of all human beings and to treat neighbors and strangers alike with respect."

Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, who chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, likewise welcomed the letter.

His statement said the presidents "are a welcome voice in this debate, as they see the potential and talent in newly arriving immigrants. 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."

The university letter in turn became a part of the package of materials available through the USCCB's Justice for Immigrants web page for use by parishes and dioceses in organizing their own efforts in support of immigration reform. The materials include sample bulletin and pulpit announcements, information on an ongoing postcard-to-Congress campaign, and backgrounders on the church's immigration teachings and public policies.

Some dioceses are focusing on the weekend of Sept. 7 and 8, just before Congress returns from its recess Sept. 9, calling for special Masses or other events about immigration. Various bishops have approached the subject in different ways.

Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Wash., convened a group representing farmers, farm workers, law enforcement, academia, politics, lawyers and churches "to determine how best to promote understanding among the people of eastern Washington on immigration issues."

A statement from the diocese said the group came up with five guiding principles [1], "which they hope all those who engage in conversation on immigration will use to frame their discussions."

Tyson said in the statement that the process was an outgrowth of conversations between U.S. and Mexican

Catholic bishops.

"Given the importance and complexity of immigration issues to the Yakima Valley, it made sense to gather a group of community leaders to determine how best to engage the community on thoughtful dialogue on the subject," he said.

And in what may be an optimistic bit of planning, CLINIC began inviting people from key organizations to its National Catholic Legalization Planning Conference in Silver Spring, Md., Sept. 30-Oct. 2.

The preliminary program agenda includes sessions on how a new immigration reform law might be implemented.

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