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Letter outlines moral values bishops say must guide immigration reform

by Nissa LaPoint by Catholic News Service

Denver — Colorado's Catholic bishops said Tuesday that the nation needs to reform its immigration laws "across the board," but they said "establishing the specifics of those new regulations is the job of lawmakers, not pastors."

"Our job is to teach about the moral values that should shape those laws, and that is what this letter aims to accomplish," said Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila and Colorado Springs Bishop Michael Sheridan, who also is apostolic administrator of the Pueblo diocese.

They released a joint pastoral letter Tuesday called "Immigration and Our Nation's Future." The letter is meant to guide the consciences of Catholics on the issue, especially for those in public office.

They stated it's easy to reduce immigrants to "lawbreakers" or "illegals" when instead the issue should be approached through the eyes of Christ, and urged reform be grounded in the truth that each person is created in the image and likeness of God.

The bishops' letter includes seven principles they asked lawmakers to use to guide their decisions: the common good; resources and private property; dignity of migrants; control of the borders; the right to emigrate; treatment of refugees; and enforcement of laws.

"We hope that these principles, which move from the most basic to the more specific, will assist you in developing an ethically balanced view of the many goods that are at stake in this difficult issue," they wrote.

"While responding to the many questions raised by immigration will not be easy," they said, "you and I

cannot fail in our duty as Catholic citizens to do our best to make decisions that improve and maintain the social, moral and spiritual health of our great nation and those who seek membership within it."

About the common good, Aquila and Sheridan said: "In practice, this means that the only meaningful goal for the common good is the integral fulfillment of the human person in community.

"In modern Western society, the common good is sometimes misconstrued as being what is good for the individual but without any thought of eternity, without any consideration of how a person's soul is impacted by a possible action."

Church teaching about the right to own property "has always been understood as being qualified by the duty to use property in a socially responsible way, in a way that supports the common good, especially the good of the poor," they said.

"The Fathers of the Church taught that the right to private property should never be exercised in a way contrary to the common good," they added.

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Their principles outlined also stressed the need for the rights and dignity of all migrants, including the undocumented, to be respected and protected.

"Because of every person's God-given dignity, the Christian response to immigrants should be one of hospitality that rejects all sentiments and manifestations of xenophobia and racism," they said.

With regard to a country's right to control its borders, the bishops stated: "The church teaches that the creation of nations and states with sovereign boundaries does not contradict the principle of the universal destination of the world's resources because it favors an internally just political order. For this reason, the church also states that each government has the duty to protect and control its borders for the sake of the common good."

Blessed John Paul II "acknowledged that indiscriminate immigration can cause 'harm and be detrimental to the common good of the community that receives the migrant,'" they wrote. "But on the other hand, he also insisted that nations should control their borders with 'full respect for the dignity of the (migrating) persons and for their families' needs.' "

People "have a natural right to emigrate, that is, to leave their country in search of better economic and social conditions for themselves and their families," they said. "This also includes a corresponding right not to emigrate."

They also urged lawmakers to "make realistic distinctions between the interests of those seeking greater economic opportunities and the rights of evacuees to be free from starvation or real persecution."

The prelates also said: "Experience shows that when a society is too ethnically and culturally diverse it can give rise to political instability. Therefore, when politicians make decisions about immigration policies, the question of integration cannot be overlooked."

Jenny Kraska, executive director of the Colorado Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops, said she hopes the pastoral letter will encourage Catholics to take action.

"What I want to see is people to feel compelled after reading this to do something regarding this issue," she told the *Denver Catholic Register*, the archdiocesan newspaper. "There is still so much to do and the conference will lead the effort."

[Nissa LaPoint is a reporter at the *Denver Catholic Register*, newspaper of the Denver archdiocese.]

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