Bishops support executive action on immigration

by Thomas Reese

In a little noted letter, two bishops chairing committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have put the Catholic bishops on record supporting executive action on immigration. The letter places the bishops on President Barack Obama's side in his dispute with congressional Republicans, who are opposed to any executive action on immigration.

The letter, sent on Sept. 9 with little fanfare, was addressed to Jeh Johnson, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, with copies of the letter going to Dennis McDonough, chief of staff to the president, and Cecilia Munoz, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. The letter was signed by Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, chair of the Committee on Migration, and Bishop Kevin Vann, chair of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. The conference issued no press release to publicize the letter and I cannot find it on the USCCB website.

The letter asked for executive action "to protect undocumented individuals and families as soon as possible, within the limits of your executive authority." "With immigration reform legislation stalled in Congress," the letter said, "our nation can no longer wait to end the suffering of family separation caused by our broken immigration system."

The Republican leadership in Congress has said any executive action by the president on immigration would poison future cooperation on any topic.

The bishops urge that some major problems on immigration be dealt with through by executive action. These would not be considered minor items by either the administration or Congress.
First, they want deferred action authorized for certain groups that might now be deported:

- Immigrants who have been in the United States for 10 years or longer and have strong community ties and equities. These people have contributed to our economy and social fabric and should be brought out of the shadows so they can "fully contribute to our society as they get processed through the legal system," say the bishops.
- Parents of U.S. citizens. "One of the tragedies of deportations," according to the bishops, "has been the separation of parents from their U.S. citizen children." Anyone who hates big government should not want the government to take away the parents of U.S. citizens.
- Parents of recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Unaccompanied children who entered our country to join their parents now face the possibility of having a parent deported.
- Individuals residing in the United States with already approved family and employment petitions. These people have had their petitions approved but because of the visa backlog are unable to receive permanent resident status and therefore would be subject to deportation. The bishops think this is wrong.

The last three groups reflect the bishops' strong concern for keeping families together. Politicians who support family values should recognize the merit of these requests from the bishops.

The bishops also call for some technical changes that would allow more immigrants to enter under family-based petitions. For example, the law no longer requires that spouses and children be included in the quota for these petitions even though the government still includes them. Not counting them would open up slots for others.

The bishops would also like the government to be more generous in granting waivers for unlawful presence, which requires those who enter the country illegally to leave the country and apply for a visa abroad. The bishops do not want families broken up by people leaving the country and then spending years away from their families while waiting for a visa.

Finally, the bishops asked that those with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), if otherwise eligible, be allowed to apply to become lawful permanent residents.

"The Administration has the opportunity to provide this relief to families who have built equities in this country," said the letter. "As Congress has been unable to pass immigration reform legislation, we urge you to exercise your authority ? as conferred by, but also limited by, the federal Constitution and statutes ? to protect these families from separation and exploitation."

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"As pastors concerned with the physical and spiritual welfare of our people," said the bishops, "we can no longer wait to end the human suffering caused by our current immigration system." Keeping families united is a priority for the bishops and they hope to make it a priority for the nation.

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