



The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State: Archbishop Alex J. Brunett of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Bishop William S. Skylstad of the Diocese of Spokane, Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla, S.J., of the Diocese of Yakima, Bishop Joseph J. Tyson and Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, M.Sp.S., Auxiliary Bishops of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

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CALL TO UNITY

Justice in Immigration Policies

Immigration reform is the subject of a heated national debate. We, the bishops of Washington State, understand the importance of this issue to our people and the complexity of the public policy challenges involved in resolving this debate. Recognizing the significant moral implications of proposed legislation, we are concerned that the debate does not become a cause for division within the body of Christ. "The presence of so many people from such diverse cultures and backgrounds in the United States invites us as Church to a profound conversion so that we can truly become a sacrament of unity." (US Catholic Bishops, 2000. "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us.") To nurture our unity, we have prepared this question-and-answer guide in order to clarify the position of the Catholic Church on this controversial issue. We hope you will find it useful as our elected officials consider changes to current immigration policies.

Q. Does the Catholic Church support illegal immigration?

A. No. The Catholic Bishops recognize the right of sovereign nations to secure their borders and do not condone unlawful entry into the United States or circumvention of our nation's immigration laws. However, U.S. immigration laws and policies do not reflect current social and economic realities. Our nation's economy relies on foreign labor and yet there are insufficient visas to meet this demand. In addition, close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents often face lengthy separations – sometimes as much as twenty years or longer – due to backlogs of available visas. The bishops believe that immigration reform should respond to the need for family reunification and recognize the economic realities that result in American reliance on foreign labor as well as the

"You shall treat the aliens who reside with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for them as for yourself, for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt."
(Lv. 19:34)

economic forces in other countries that compel people to immigrate to the United States in search of work.

Q. Why is the Catholic Church involved in immigration politics?

A. The Catholic Church has a longstanding interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scripture, Catholic teaching and our own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of immigrants when their God-given rights are not respected. Immigrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that must be respected regardless of their legal status.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. IMMIGRATION

Immigration has played an important role in American history. Before the era of rapid communications and transportation, America openly encouraged immigration to settle its empty lands. The Immigration Service was established in 1891 to deal with a dramatic increase in immigration that began in 1880. In 1924, Congress created the U.S. Border Patrol. In 1965, Congress instituted a preference system designed to unite immigrant families and attract skilled immigrants to the United States. Today, the majority of applicants for immigration visas come from Asia and Latin America.

Q. Shouldn't the U.S. borders be secured before immigration reform is addressed?

A. In a 2003 joint statement, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope," the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States recognize the right of sovereign nations to control their territories. They also assert that wealthy nations whose abundant resources enable them to meet the needs of their own people have a serious obligation to accommodate

immigrants so that their basic human needs can be met. The bishops make it clear that people who cannot find employment to support themselves and their families in their country of origin have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. As a sovereign nation, the United States should provide ways to accommodate this right.

Q. Aren't immigrants taking jobs from U.S. citizens?

A. Available statistics do not support this conclusion. Many jobs in our country are unfilled and immigrants are needed to fill the jobs that U.S. citizens will not take. Immigrants often come to the U.S. because they cannot find work in their own country and frequently accept work in low-paying, dangerous occupations that are unfilled by American workers. Although immigrants comprise only 11 percent of all U.S. residents, 20 percent of low-wage workers are immigrants. On average, immigrants earn lower hourly wages and nearly half of all immigrants earn less than 200 percent of the minimum wage. Many immigrants work in unsafe environments and are over-represented in industries with a higher risk of fatalities.

Q. Isn't it true that immigrants don't pay taxes and many come here and live on welfare?

A. By some estimates, immigrants will contribute \$500 billion toward our social security system over the next 20 years. Immigrants pay state and federal taxes in the form of income, property and sales taxes. A range of studies finds that immigrants pay between \$90 and \$140 billion a year in federal, state and local taxes. Even though they pay taxes, immigrants are restricted from most public assistance programs. Only newly-arriving legal immigrants are eligible for federal means-tested public benefits and they are generally barred for their first five years in the United States from receiving these benefits. A small number of programs (such as school lunch programs and emergency medical services) are open to all people in need.

"The new immigrants call us back to our ancestral heritage as descendants of immigrants and to our baptismal heritage as members of the body of Christ."

(U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2000. "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us.")

Q. Aren't immigrants a drain on the U.S. economy?

A. During the 1990s, half of all new workers were foreign-born. These workers filled gaps left by native-born workers in both high-skill and low-skill jobs. Immigrants are an essential supplement to the

WASHINGTON STATE IMMIGRATION FACTS

- An estimated 10 percent of Washington State's citizens were born outside of the United States to parents who were not citizens of the United States.
- The most common languages, other than English, spoken at home by Washington citizens are Spanish (6 percent) and Asian and Pacific Island languages (4.4 percent). An estimated 14 percent of Washington citizens speak a language other than English at home.
- There are 258,000 naturalized citizens living in Washington State and an estimated 357,000 immigrants who are not citizens, many with visas.
- It is estimated that 39 percent of immigrants to Washington were born in Asia, 28 percent in Latin America and 20 percent in Europe.

U.S. workforce and some start their own businesses. The net benefit of immigration to the U.S. economy is estimated at nearly \$10 billion per year.

Q. Why are there so many illegal immigrants in the U.S.?

A. Approximately 75 percent of today's immigrants have legal, permanent visas. Of the 25 percent that are undocumented, 40 percent overstayed temporary visas. Prior to the 1960s, the term "illegal immigrant" was almost non-existent. Immigrants were simply foreign-born people who came here seeking citizenship. It was not until recent times, when immigrants from Mexico and Central America increased as a percentage of total immigration, that the term "illegal immigrant" came into greater use. The percentage of the population that is foreign born now stands at 11.5 percent compared to about 15 percent in the early 1900s.

The information in this document has been adapted from the "Justice for Immigrants" website prepared by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The statistics cited in this document may be found at www.justiceforimmigrants.org under "Learn the Issues."

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