

# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

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Emotions flare up at the mention of immigration. People feel strongly about the issue on all sides. People express their opinion on Web sites, in blogs, at rallies and in phone calls to their legislators. Like other bishops, I have received many e-mails, calls and letters mostly voicing anger about my involvement with the issue. Certainly, attitudes toward immigration guide the decision of some voters, especially in my state of Arizona.

As people of faith it is critical that we understand the complexities of immigration. As people of faith it is critical that we have opportunities to discuss the issue so that we can better understand the Church's concern and involvement in this issue. As people of faith we need to share our attitudes and feelings and—as hard as it is sometimes—we need to listen.

Why, then, is the Church involved in the immigration issue? There are 3 broad, or overarching, reasons. In this *Update*, we'll explore 1) how Scripture and Catholic teaching see and understand immigration; 2) immigration's impact on the life of the Church: our parish life, our programs, our growth and diversity; and 3) the moral issues that the Church is called to address in the broader society.

Let's start with a discussion of Sacred Scripture.

## 1. Immigrants in the Bible

In the Old Testament we hear Yahweh's preoccupation with the "anawim, the little ones, the widow and orphans, the stranger" (see Exodus 22:22). In Isaiah 43 we hear that we ought not harm or hurt the alien, for "you yourselves were aliens in the Land of Egypt" (an echo from Deuteronomy 10:19). The Israelites are exhorted not to wrong any widow or orphan or stranger. The Israelites must remember that they were enslaved in Egypt, so they need to be sensitive to the basic needs of others and not to dismiss or exclude or ignore them. In Leviticus 19:33-34 the Israelites are reminded by Moses, describing the community they should become, that they are to treat the stranger with respect and not molest him: "Count them as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself."

In Leviticus, too, we hear about the Jubilee Year. That is a year in which God's people are to share their goods in God's name. After all, God alone is the God of all things. This text is filled with reference to "distributive justice": We are not to hoard all for ourselves, but rather to share resources with those with great need.

In the New Testament, the experience of the migrant and the refugee is played out in the life of Christ, our Savior. As we all know, he was born in modest circumstances in a stable, since there was "no room in the inn" (see Lk 2:7) In his adult life, Christ was himself an itinerant preacher, who, as Christ says in Matthew, had no home.

Jesus and his Holy Family were also refugees, as they fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod as mentioned in Matthew's Gospel. They left their home out of fear for their lives, especially for the life of their son.

# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

Page 2 of 6

---

The Holy Family experienced being strangers in a strange land. They felt the fear, the anxiety of being displaced. They were turned away and shunned. If they were on earth today, they would qualify, under international law, as a refugee family.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, the one whom we would least expect to respond to the man beaten and robbed. The priest looked away, the Levite looked away, but the Samaritan saw the desperation of the man and chose to take care of him even at his own expense.

Jesus reminded his disciples in Mt 25 that at the Last Judgment we will be judged not by what we own or what we have read but by what we have done. He told us that when we feed or clothe or visit the littlest and weakest among us, we do it to him.

Catholics, then, are called to welcome the stranger, because in the face of the stranger or the migrant we see the face of Christ.

## 2. The life of the Church

The teaching of the Old and New Testaments has been expanded upon by popes and bishops over the centuries through Catholic social teaching. The heart of the Church's teaching is grounded in the dignity and sanctity of the human person from conception to natural death. Each person is entitled to live in conditions that enhance, not diminish, the dignity of human life.

In 2003 the bishops of the United States and Mexico issued a groundbreaking document, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (see C0906). In that document they outline the social justice principles from our Catholic tradition pertinent to immigration.

In brief, they make five main points. First, they say, "People have a right to find economic opportunities in their homeland." Second, "Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families." Third, "Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders." Fourth, "Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection." And finally, "The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected."

Papal teaching, too, has been consistent in upholding the right of people living in abject situations to migrate in order to care for themselves and their family.

Likewise, the Church has consistently taught that we must be committed to the exile, the alien and the migrant. Each year the Holy Father puts out a statement articulating this commitment and the underlying teaching on the dignity of all human life. In last year's statement he defended the "right to emigrate" as a fundamental right to leave one's country and enter another country to look for better conditions of life ("Message for 97th World Day for Migrants and Refugees, 2011"). That implies responsibilities among immigrants and the host countries.

"States have the right to regulate migration flows and to defend their own frontiers always guaranteeing the respect due to the dignity of each and every person. Immigrants, moreover, have the duty to integrate into the host country, respecting its laws and its national identity," he said.

# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

Page 3 of 6

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## 3. Our Moral Stance

Immigration is a human issue and immigration laws impact human beings and their welfare. It is thus important to understand the full reality of immigration and our immigration system.

As bishop of the Diocese of Tucson, I see immigration—particularly irregular immigration—as a daily concern. The Tucson area has seen the most migratory activity over the past 20 years, as other parts of the border have been shut off by the U.S. government.

Let me share a few statistics with you. Since 2000 the U.S. has spent \$117 billion on immigration enforcement, while the number of undocumented immigrants has increased by nearly 4 million persons. Why do they come illegally or overstay their visas? Because there are only 5,000 permanent visas in the immigration system for them to come legally. We say at the same time Help Wanted (the 5,000) and Keep Out (everybody else)!

The reality along the border presents many concerns. With increased border enforcement, criminal elements have become more and more involved in assisting migrants to enter this country illegally. This has led to mistreatment, even in some instances sexual exploitation and violence against migrants.

Every day drugs and weapons pass along our southern border. This must be stopped. The power of drug cartels must be broken. Drug peddlers have even stooped to forcing children who cross the border to go to school in the United States to become “mules” carrying drugs into our country.

In 2010 alone 252 illegal border crossers were found dead in the Tucson area along our Arizona border. From 1998 to 2011 over 5,000 persons died in the American desert, including women and children. How tragic a situation this is for people seeking a better life! How tragic a situation for their families who suffer the grief of a loved one’s death in the desert!

So many of those who try to migrate, especially those from the south of Mexico and from Central and Latin America, are living in desperate situations. They lack adequate resources to live a decent way of life. They are pushed north because of their condition and they are pulled north by the availability of jobs and opportunities that don’t exist in their own country.

There are no easy answers to the challenges of immigration. A first step each of us needs to make is to become knowledgeable and aware of the complexity of the immigration question. Each dimension—human, political, social, economic and moral—needs to be addressed if we are to respond adequately.

## 4. Morality and Policy

The Catholic bishops continue to advocate with the president and Congress to pass comprehensive immigration policy change to fix a system described as broken by former President George W. Bush and many others.

What do the U.S. bishops prescribe? We prescribe a comprehensive immigration policy, one that would help end illegal entry and help to focus energy on securing the border from criminal elements.

# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

Page 4 of 6

---

Illegal immigration is not good for anyone. It is not good for the migrants risking their own lives crossing the borders. It is not good for a country not to know who is crossing its border.

We U.S. bishops—teachers, leaders and servants of all Catholics—want to replace illegality with legality: legal avenues for entry and legal status for the undocumented, provided they meet certain criteria.

What are the elements of comprehensive immigration reform?

*1. A comprehensive immigration policy change would include a worker program allowing people to enter the country legally to do work needed here.*

It would include worker rights so that people entering the country would be paid equal wages and have the protections that would prevent them from becoming indentured servants.

U.S. workers would have the first shot at jobs, but migrants would have a chance if a U.S. worker is not found.

What would this type of program do? It would ensure that migrants have a safe and legal pathway to work in the United States, protecting them from exploitation by smugglers or unscrupulous employers and from death in the desert.

*2. Comprehensive immigration policy change would include a pathway to citizenship for the 12 million people who are in the country illegally.* This does not mean amnesty, like the amnesty that took place in 1986 under President Ronald Reagan.

Rather, comprehensive policy change that would include an earned pathway would make demands of those seeking legalization.

Those undocumented immigrants would need to pay reasonable fines, learn English and accept a provisional legal status as they go to the back of the line behind those who have applied legally to enter the country.

The U.S. bishops, as well as others, believe that these requirements would ensure that migrants here illegally would pay their debt to society and earn their way to citizenship. It would permit the United States to continue to benefit from their hard work and would keep immigrant families together.

We cannot allow people to remain in the shadows, people who are contributing to our community and want nothing else but to be good and respectful members of our society.

In the shadows, they are being taken advantage of and exploited. In the shadows it is difficult for them to report crimes and injustices they are experiencing. In the shadows they live in fear of having some of their family deported.

A comprehensive immigration policy would support family unification. The Church is always concerned with the integrity of the family: We need to find ways to keep migrant families intact.

# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

Page 5 of 6

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## A Question of Faith

Immigration is a complex and controversial issue. But we cannot, as a nation, continue to kick this issue down the road. A federal solution is needed, and needed now.

We must continue to educate the American public and our Catholic people about the need for a comprehensive and humane solution to this problem. As a moral matter, we cannot continue to exploit and dehumanize these brothers and sisters, who simply want to survive.

As a nation, we cannot continue to accept their toil and taxes without offering them the protection of our laws. Our Catholic faith demands it.

## A Personal Encounter

Let me share some stories about the migrant that may help us move beyond attitudes expressed in the public debate that sometimes paint the migrant as less than human or as intending harm.

Not long after I arrived in Tucson early in 2002, I was invited to go to Altar, in the Mexican state of Sonora. It's just about a two-hour drive from Tucson. We brag about our weather in Arizona, but let me tell you, in the summer, the Sonoran Desert is brutally—fatally—hot.

The vast dimensions of this desert, while starkly beautiful, have become a dying ground for migrants who must walk through it to enter our country.

Up until about 20 years ago, Altar was a sleepy farm town with a population of a couple of thousand. But, for the last two decades, Altar has been transformed, has been taken over, by one industry.

The industry of Altar is storage, transportation and exploitation. Altar is the staging area, the gathering point, for people on the move. Migrants. Storing them. Transporting them. Exploiting them.

It was in Altar that for the first time I met the migrant.

I met the migrant in the town's plaza. That's where dozens of crowded buses drop migrants off each day. The plaza is fringed by booths at which they can purchase backpacks, gallon plastic jugs of water, images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, black clothing, even snakebite kits.

I met the migrant in one of the *casas de huéspedes* ("guest houses") where they stay for days awaiting their call from their "coyote," their guide, to board a truck or van for the ride to the border. The *casas* are essentially warehouses. The migrants are crowded into one room, and they lie on triple-decked bunk beds made out of rough lumber. Their anxious eyes glimmer in the near darkness.

Many of those I met were teenage boys and young adult men, most from the southern Mexican state of Chiapas or from Central America. They appeared timid and frightened, but they were determined. They want a better life for themselves, for their families. Like any of us they love their families and want what is best for them.

## WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

BY: BISHOP GERALD KICANAS

Page 6 of 6

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Some of those I met have made several attempts to enter the United States. When I asked them why they keep trying, they would say, "We have no other choice. We cannot make it in our own country. It is so difficult."

Those who have tried the crossing and who have had to turn back or who were caught and deported tell of terrifying moments passing through the desert at night worrying about bandits who prey on migrants and about snakes or insects that could harm them. They spoke of the heat they had to endure and their swollen, bleeding feet. I asked, "Why do you keep trying?" They answered, "We have to try to improve our lives."

I met the migrant as I stood just outside Altar, by the dirt road along which the crowded minivans pass, taking them to the small village of Sasabe, within walking distance of the border. One van stopped. I heard a voice ask if I might give them a blessing. As I looked into the van I saw men and women with fear in their eyes asking for divine protection and help. I blessed them.

I met the migrant in a Tucson hospital. He was a teenager (15) from Chiapas. He spoke only his native language, which is neither English nor Spanish. He had climbed aboard a freight train, going north in hopes of finding a job to help his mom and seven siblings. He was in the hospital, I learned, because when he jumped from the moving train he fell beneath it and his legs were severed. His dreams were dashed. He would return home, now dependent on the family he wanted to help.