Church Urges Humane, Comprehensive Solution to Immigration Issue

By Kevin Appleby

The national immigration debate has generated tremendous, often emotional, discussion about the impact of the growing number of undocumented immigrants on our communities. Heated talk about the economic, social, and enforcement aspects of the issue predominates. We should understand, however, that above all, immigration is a humanitarian, and, ultimately, a moral issue.

Each day in parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools the human consequences of an inadequate immigration system are apparent. Families are separated; migrant workers are exploited by smugglers and unscrupulous employers; and human beings, desperate to survive, perish in the American desert. As our nation benefits from the hard work of undocumented workers, we fail to extend to them basic workplace and legal protections. Worse, some scapegoat immigrants for our social ills.

The U.S. bishops' statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* urges Catholics to study issues such as immigration before going to the polls.

Because of current practices and policies of many U.S. cities and states, and their harmful effect on human life and dignity, the bishops have stated that the status quo is immoral and have called for comprehensive reform of the immigration system. Their prescription for mending the system is to emphasize *legality* over illegality through the creation of legal avenues for migration and the extension of legal status and a path to citizenship to undocumented immigrants. This includes rigorous enforcement of the laws, to be sure, but also suggests a more comprehensive approach which reforms all aspects of the system. This remedy represents the most effective, humane, and practical approach to solving our immigration crisis.

Some argue that undocumented workers and their families should not receive legal status because they live outside the law. Before rendering judgment, we must consider that U.S. policy actually creates conditions which *encourage* illegal immigration and law breaking. For example, while the federal government has spent billions on border enforcement over the past 15 years, during the same period the number of undocumented immigrants in the nation has more than doubled. This is primarily because, once they

arrive in the United States, almost 80 percent of male migrant workers find jobs with U.S. companies. This magnet of available jobs induces immigrants to come.

Compounding the problem, U.S. immigration law fails to provide legal channels for these workers to migrate safely and legally. Work visas for low-skilled workers are absurdly small compared to demand – 5,000 permanent and 66,000 temporary ones per year. Family unity visas can be even scarcer. Waiting times as long as ten years for immediate members of Mexican families is not unusual.

We also must consider both the *intent* and *effect* of the lawbreaking by immigrants, two mitigating factors often considered in U.S. courts. The intent of immigrant workers is to work and support their families, and the effect is that they support the U.S. economy by working in important industries in need of laborers.

For example, leaders in the home building industry estimate that if the undocumented workforce left the United States, housing construction would be delayed six to eight months and housing costs would increase 30 to 40 percent. The health care industry relies heavily on immigrant workers to care for the elderly and other infirmed patients. The Department of Labor predicts that demand for foreign-born workers in these and other industries will increase dramatically.

Comprehensive immigration reform represents a humane solution to our crisis. It will enable immigrants and their families to remain together and allow them to contribute their talents to their communities without fear. It will also help reduce the exploitation of migrants and the number of those who perish in attempts to come to the United States.

Elected officials must examine the root causes of migration from home communities and work with their governments to create jobs for migrants at home. This is the long-term solution that the erection of a 700-mile border fence will not provide. It is imperative that both parties and both chambers of Congress work hard to produce legislation that creates an immigration system predicated on the rule of law and that upholds values all Americans cherish—hard work, opportunity, and compassion.

- - -

Kevin Appleby is director of the Office of Migration and Refugee Policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.