

Remarks on Immigration Policy
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I am grateful to our Supreme Knight, Dr. Carl Anderson and to the Supreme Council for this opportunity to ask you to pray and think a little bit more about the Church's teachings on immigration. Yesterday we heard about Blessed John Paul II call to the new evangelization and the importance of America as one continent united by our Catholic faith.

This morning we had a moving ceremony for the beginning of the Marian Year of Prayer dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. So, I think it is very appropriate that we briefly reflect on the issue of immigration. I am glad that we are doing it in Denver. I joined the Knights of Columbus in Denver during my time as Auxiliary Bishop. It was at Council 539 at the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. Council 539 was instrumental in starting many other Councils west of the Mississippi and it is specially significant the fact that they directed the establishment of the first Council of the Knights of Columbus in Mexico City. This fact again highlights our unity as one continent.

Now, on immigration: I know this issue is hard for people — including many people who are trying to be good Catholics. I am not a politician. I am a pastor of souls — and an American citizen. That is my perspective on these issues.

As pastor of the largest Catholic community in the United States, I am deeply affected by our nation's immigration policy crisis. Historically, the Catholic Church has always been a Church of immigrants — just as America has always been a nation of immigrants. American Catholics form one spiritual family drawn from some 60 ethnic and national groups from every continent. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, ministry and worship is conducted in 42 languages. About 70 percent of the flock I minister to is Hispanic. And Los Angeles is not exception — but a sign of the future. More than one-third of Catholics in America today are of Latino descent — and that number is growing. Hispanics accounted for almost 60 percent of our population growth in the last ten years. They now make up 16 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly one-quarter of all American children age 17 and under are Hispanic. So immigration policy, especially as it relates to Latino immigration, is of deep concern to us as Catholics and as citizens.

The Church's perspective on these issues is rooted in Jesus Christ's teaching that every human person is created in God's image and has God-given dignity and rights. From a Catholic standpoint, America's founders got it exactly right. Human rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are universal and inalienable. They come from God, not governments. And these rights are not contingent on where you are born or what racial or ethnic group you are born into. The human right to life, the foundation of every other right, implies the natural right to emigrate. Because in order for you and your family to live a life worthy of your God-given dignity, certain things are required. At minimum: food, shelter, clothing, and the means to make a decent living. If you and your family are unable to secure life's necessities in your home country — due to political instability, economic distress, religious persecution, or other conditions that offend basic human dignity — you must be free to seek these things in another country.

In Catholic thinking, the right to immigration is a "natural right." That means it is universal and inalienable. But it is not absolute. Immigrants are obliged to respect and abide by the laws and traditions of the countries they come to reside in. Catholic teaching also recognizes the sovereignty of nations to secure their borders and make decisions about who and how many foreigners they allow into their countries.

Our government has the duty to consider immigration's impact on the domestic economy and our national security. However, we must always make sure that we are not exaggerating these concerns in ways that deny the basic humanitarian needs of good people seeking refuge in our country.

These Catholic principles are consistent with America's founding ideals. They are also consistent with America's proud legacy as one nation under God made up from many peoples of all races and creeds. Based on these principles the American bishops support comprehensive immigration policy reform that protects the integrity of our national borders and provides undocumented immigrants the opportunity to earn permanent residency and eventual citizenship. So the political issue is basically this: How can we find a way to accept these newcomers and balance that with the need for our nation to protect our borders, to control the flow of immigrants, and to keep track of who is living within our borders? But the important thing for us is to approach these political issues — not as Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives — but as Catholics. And as Catholics, we should be alarmed by the human toll of our failure to fix our broken immigration system.

Currently there are an estimated 11 million persons living in our country without proper legal documentation. The vast majority of these persons are working and contributing to our economy and society. But because of their immigration status they are forced to live in the shadows, without adequate benefits or protections against discrimination and exploitation. It is true, many of these people entered this country illegally or they came in legally with a tourist visa and they stayed longer after their visa expired. That fact troubles me. I do not like to see our American rule of law flouted. And I support just and appropriate penalties that would give undocumented workers a way to make restitution and to legalize their status. America has always been a nation of justice and law. But as Americans we have also always been a people of generosity, mercy and forgiveness. Unfortunately, our nation's current response to illegal immigration is not worthy of our national character.

My point is simple: We need to find a better way to make immigration policy and enforce it. And in this policy debate, Catholics have a special place. Because Catholics, especially, bear the truth about all Americans. Namely, that we are all children of immigrants. If we trace the genealogies of everyone in this room today, they will lead us out beyond our borders to some foreign land where each of our ancestors originally came from. In my personal case, the first members of my family came to what now is Texas in 1805. Our inheritance comes to us now as a gift and as a duty. At the least, it means we should have some empathy for this new generation of immigrants. For Christians, empathy means seeing Jesus Christ in every person and especially in the poor and the vulnerable. And we need to remember, my friends: Jesus was uncompromising on this point. In the evening of our lives, he told us, our love for God will be judged by our love for him in the person of the least among us. This includes, he said, the immigrant or the stranger. Very few people "choose" to leave their homelands. Emigration is almost always forced upon people by the dire conditions they face in their lives. Most of the men and women who are here illegally have traveled hundreds even thousands of miles. They have left everything behind, risked their safety and even their lives. They did this, not for their own comfort or selfish needs. They did this to feed their loved ones. To be good mothers and fathers. To be loving sons and daughters. Many of you are fathers or mothers. So the question to have to ask yourselves is this: What wouldn't you do to provide for your loved ones? To feed hungry mouths? To give your children a better future?

Those are questions we all need to ask ourselves. I only want to offer one suggestion. Our perspective on this issue will change if you begin to see these "illegals" for who they really are — mothers and fathers, sons and daughters — not much different from yourselves. The immigrants I meet every day in my ministry are people of energy and aspiration. They are people who are not afraid of hard work or sacrifice. They are people who have courage and the other virtues — and who value God, family and community. Almost 70 percent of Hispanics in our country are Catholics. We are called to see all men and women as our brothers and sisters in Christ — but especially those who share in the one Body of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. That is why I believe comprehensive immigration reform offers us a special moment as a nation — and as a Church. As immigrants have in every generation, this new generation of immigrants promises to make us a stronger, more virtuous and prosperous America. As I said, the other day, immigration is not a problem but an opportunity! So today I would like to ask you to pray about this issue and to learn more about the teachings of the Catholic Church on immigration. The future of the Church in America depends on our faithfulness to Christ "so that the world may know new hope," as Blessed John Paul prayed. I ask that the Mother of the Americas, Our Lady of Guadalupe, who revealed herself to a Mexican who became a saint, St. Juan Diego, help us all in our weakness. That we might have the courage to bear witness to Jesus Christ's call to welcome the stranger.

Thank you for taking the time to hear me, my brother knights.