

Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

### What is a “guest worker” program? Won’t such a program only encourage more illegal immigration?

The U.S. bishops support a program which protects the rights of both U.S. and foreign-born workers and allows them the opportunity to assert their rights in the workplace. (Previous programs like the 1940s-era “*braceros* program” were not supported by the Church because they failed to provide adequate protection for foreign laborers.) A “guest worker” program would provide temporary visas for migrant workers to come and work in specific industries, such as agriculture, service, and construction. The status quo makes illegal immigration inevitable because there are no real avenues for those who wish to come here to work — at least not adequate to meet the demand for labor. Creating legal avenues for migration should reduce illegal immigration flow.

### One of the congressional proposals would punish those who give assistance to illegal immigrants. There is some debate as to whether that would include humanitarian aid, such as that offered by many Catholic organizations. What is the truth about that part of the proposal?

House bill H.R. 4437 contains a provision which would make a felon of a person who “assists” an undocumented person “knowingly or with reckless disregard as to whether they are undocumented.” The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) believes that this provision could place church programs and church personnel at risk of criminal prosecution for being essentially a “Good Samaritan.” Current law does not require social service programs such as those run by the Church to ask for legal papers before providing service, nor should it.

### Some say that letting in too many immigrants, because they are often a cheap source of labor, could hurt the wages of workers already in the country. Is this true?

While some studies show that immigrant workers may have an impact on the job status and wages of some low-skilled American workers, such as high school dropouts, immigrant workers generally do not compete with U.S. workers for unskilled jobs. Overall, immigrant workers fill crucial jobs in areas in which there are few Americans either available or willing to work — for example, in agriculture.

### Won’t a more generous immigration policy risk allowing terrorists and other undesirables into the United States?

It’s not so much a question of a “more generous immigration policy” as it is of a more just policy — and a more rational policy. We have a large “illegal workforce” because our broken immigration system does not provide for legal avenues for employers to find willing workers for jobs that need to be filled. A more just and rational immigration policy will ensure that government authorities can better identify and monitor who is coming into the country.

### What level of border enforcement do the bishops see as necessary and appropriate?

A comprehensive immigration reform will reduce the pressure on the southern border by providing legal avenues for foreign workers to work legally in the U.S. In the past ten years, more than one billion dollars has been spent on border enforcement — and yet during the same period of time, illegal migration has increased. The problem is not so much one of border security as it is of labor supply: solve the labor supply issue through a temporary worker program, and the difficult task of the border patrol will become much more manageable. Then the border patrol could devote itself to better protecting us from the real bad guys. An enforcement-only approach entailing building higher and longer fences will prove expensive, but it will not prove effective.

### What can the average Catholic in the pew do to support the kind of immigration reform that the Catholic Church endorses?

They can visit the Justice for Immigrants website at [justiceforimmigrants.org](http://justiceforimmigrants.org) to obtain information on the position of the U.S. bishops and how they may contact their federal officials to support comprehensive immigration reform. Support from Catholic parishioners can make a real difference in helping Congress to enact a just and comprehensive reform of our immigration laws.

### For More Information:

“What About Illegal Immigration?” *The Catholic Answer*, September/October 2006

Statements by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops can be found at [www.usccb.org/statements.htm](http://www.usccb.org/statements.htm).

For additional Catholic resources or to order bulk copies of this pamphlet contact:

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# Immigration

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# Immigration in the United States

The United States of America is a nation of immigrants; throughout history, people have left their homelands for a wide variety of reasons — religious, economic, political — to resettle here. Today is no different. In the early twentieth century, as much as 15% of the U.S. population was foreign-born. Even today, the U.S. Census Bureau tells us, our foreign-born population stands at 11.5%. Most citizens of the United States have an immigrant relative in the not-too-distant past.

In this pamphlet, the Most Rev. Thomas Wenski, Bishop of the Diocese of Orlando, answers questions often raised by Catholics concerning Catholic social teaching and the issue of immigration.

## In a nutshell, what is the U.S. bishops' position on immigration reform? Does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* have anything to say about this issue?

The bishops believe that the current U.S. immigration system is broken and needs to be reformed in all aspects; that is, comprehensively. This would include a path to citizenship for the 11-12 million undocumented in the country; a temporary worker program to allow migrant workers to enter safely and humanely; and a reform of the way that

family-based immigration visas are allocated, so that family members can be reunited more quickly. The Church also teaches that the root causes of migration — namely, global economic disparities — need to be addressed through what Pope John Paul II called “the globalization of solidarity.”

The Church has taken a position on immigration because, besides being an economic, social, and legal issue, it is also a human one, and thus ultimately has moral implications. Whatever is human, or touches on the human person and his or her dignity, is a concern of the Church.

The teachings about immigration reform are derived from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* teachings on social justice. In 2004, at the request of the Holy Father, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published a *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Migration, an important theme in the teachings of the popes of the last century, is also a major theme in the Scriptures: the Holy Family were refugees who fled the terror of Herod, and Jesus was an itinerant with “no place to lay His head.” Jesus also taught us to “welcome the stranger,” for “what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me.”

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?” [...] “As you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

— Mt. 25:37-38, 40



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## Some charge that the Church is in favor of a nation without borders, that we support illegal immigration. How do you respond to that?

The Church does not favor illegal immigration in any sense. It is not good for the migrant, who often suffers abuse by smugglers, exploitation in the workplace, and even death in the desert. It is not good for society or for local communities, because it creates a permanent underclass with no rights and no opportunity to assert them. That is why the Church supports the creation of legal avenues for migration and legal status for migrants. The Church has always supported the right of a sovereign nation to secure its borders, although it should be done in a manner that protects human life to the greatest degree possible. In any case, the so-called “illegals” are not the problem and should not be demonized — the problem that needs to be fixed is the broken system.

## Does the Church have the right to speak out on immigration reform, which is largely a political issue?

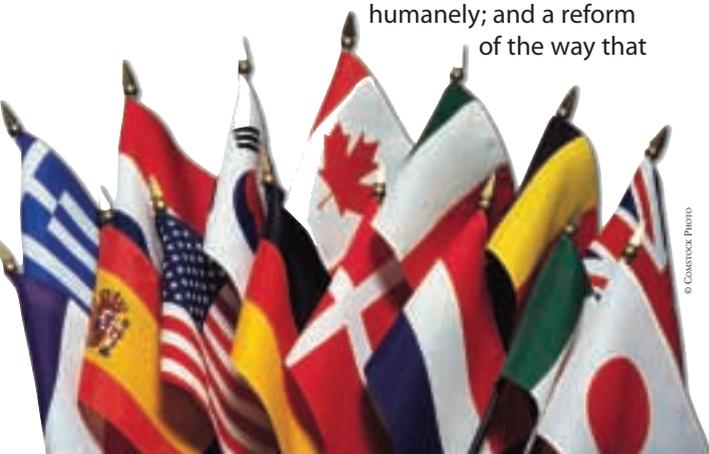
All public policy issues — abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, poverty reduction, and immigration reform — have political aspects to them. The Church is well within her rights to speak out on public policy issues of moral consequence and often does. In fact, the Church has a moral obligation to speak out on issues which impact human dignity and human life. In the immigration area, the Church brings special expertise to the table because of our long history in receiving and helping integrate immigrants both into our Church and into American society.

## What is your background and expertise in the area of immigration?

Well, perhaps, first of all, I would say that I am the son of an immigrant. My father emigrated from Russian-occupied Poland as a child with his family. That, I believe, gave me the empathy that I have for immigrants. I spent all my priesthood working with immigrants in South Florida. For 18 years, I was the parish priest of several Haitian communities — and thus experienced firsthand the joys and sorrows of these newcomers, many of whom arrived in rickety boats after a perilous voyage across dangerous seas. I ministered to them in detention centers, in migrant camps, and in inner-city Miami. I still remember one man telling me that he thought risking his life on a dangerous sea was worth it, since *dan reken pi dous pase lamize* (the shark's teeth are sweeter than misery). That made what the Church taught real: by immigrating, even without legal papers, those Haitians were essentially asserting their human dignity. They were seeking conditions worthy of human life.

## In general, is immigration good for our country, or does it create new burdens on U.S. citizens?

Almost every Catholic in America is, at most, only a generation or two removed from the immigrant experience. Only the most bigoted anti-Catholic would argue that we have not made a positive contribution to American life. Our immigrant forbearers helped build this nation, and while opponents of immigration play on people's fears that immigrants today take away jobs, change the culture, and eat up public resources, the truth of the matter is immigrants continue to play a vital role in the development of America. Given the low birth rates among U.S.-born citizens and the impending retirement of the Baby Boomers, immigrants and the contribution of their labor will continue to play an essential role in the growth of America and its economy. The majority of research studies in this area in no way support the idea that immigration is harmful to America. And, as we see throughout the country, immigrants bring new life and energy to many of our Catholic parishes.



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