

IMMIGRATION STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF CALIFORNIA

November 25, 2007

Each of us wants and needs to belong—to family, to community, or to country. As Catholics we are privileged to belong to the body of Christ—His Church. The teachings of the Catholic Church, rooted in scripture and over 2,000 years of rich tradition, guide us to the knowledge that part of belonging to the Body of Christ is to love and to help each other—our family and our neighbors. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, drawing on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, reminds us that:

“Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor...that love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.”

Reflecting on both the teachings of our Church about helping our neighbor and the reasons for the current “immigration problem,” we have several observations:

From our experience, the overwhelming majority of undocumented immigrants to America are not criminals: They migrate in order to find work to support themselves and their families. They perform work in industries important to California and the nation—such as agriculture, service and construction. Our current immigration system is outmoded because it does not contain sufficient work visas for temporary migrant workers to enter the country in a safe, legal and orderly manner.

AMERICA'S CATHOLIC SAINTS

Since its founding, the United States has welcomed millions of immigrants. History tells us of the waves of people flocking to America's shores—from Germany, Italy, Poland, and Ireland; from China and Spain; from Scandinavia and Great Britain.

There are a number of American Catholic saints who served the immigrants of their day—thereby living that love of neighbor which led to their encounter with God. Among them were *Elizabeth Ann Seton* (1774-1821), *Mother Théodore Guérin* (1798-1856), *Bishop John N. Neuman* (1811-1860), *Mother Frances Cabrini* (1850-1917) and *Katharine Drexel* (1858-1955).

Today, people come to America from Viet Nam, Mexico, Latin America, Russia, Thailand, Korea and other countries. Many of them seek escape from poverty and oppression. Many just want a chance to provide for their families.

Each saint exercised the Church's ministry of charity by serving the poor, educating the children, and caring for the sick. And always—especially in the case of *Mother Cabrini*, *Patron Saint of Immigrants*—aiding those newly arrived in our country.

As Catholics we are exhorted to pattern our lives after those of the saints. Recalling that for most of the country's history the American Catholic Church was an immigrant Church—each of us could do no better than embrace our modern-day immigrants as our neighbors.

As Catholic bishops, we acknowledge the right and the necessity of our country to maintain our borders and enforce our laws. However, we caution that while so doing, our government *must*

respect human rights and dignity and minimize the separation of families. We have consistently held that a restructuring of policy so as to address *all* aspects of immigration is the right way to secure our country, make our communities safe, and effectively solve the problem of unauthorized migration to our country.

We make the following suggestions of elements which ought to be considered in a restructuring of immigration policy:

- Easily available temporary visas for those willing to work
- Improved border security and enhanced humanitarian training for border guards
- Fair and equitable rules and reasonable time frames for processing applications to become legal permanent residents
- Compassionate rules and practical time frames for family reunification for legal resident aliens and naturalized citizens
- Reasonable requirements for legal residents to become citizens
- Recognition of the impact of globalization and free trade on patterns of migration

There are estimates of millions of people living in the United States without proper documentation—many live in fear of deportation or in mourning for family members who have been deported. It is important to recognize that California’s economy would be weakened—if not severely harmed—with a deportation of undocumented workers. In our view, they should be given the opportunity to adjust their legal status and to earn the right to remain in the country permanently and legally. We ought not to benefit from the fruits of their labor, on one hand, and relegate them to an underclass on the other.

We understand that many Californians are troubled by the presence of a large number of undocumented immigrants in our State. We acknowledge and share that concern. Illegal immigration is good neither for society nor for the person migrating. However, we urge Catholics—and all Californians—to reject attacks on these immigrants and to work constructively toward a human resolution of the problem of illegal immigration.

As Catholics we are enjoined by our Holy Father to love our neighbor so as to encounter God. As people of good will, we entreat Congress to immediately return to consideration of a restructured immigration policy. And as Bishops, we call upon Catholics and all people of good will—recalling our nation’s history—to treat each other with dignity and respect and to work together constructively to ensure a positive outcome to this vital national debate. We hold all concerned in our prayers.