

# **A hard-hearted approach to immigration**

“If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.”

It is a psalm sung in Catholic churches the world over, and a charge – our charge as Christians and followers of Christ for how we should treat others.

Too often, however, we fail to heed this simple command. This is especially true when we find ourselves in the midst of conflict and debate.

The passions ignited by the recent passage of Arizona’s new immigration law reflect how hard our hearts have become toward those human beings most directly affected by this legislation. They also reflect how deeply this issue touches the core understanding of who we are as a nation.

The law, which our U.S. bishops have rightly labeled “draconian,” gives local authorities broad powers to arrest individuals suspected of being in the country illegally. Serious questions have been raised about its constitutionality, and the Arizona bishops and others are concerned that the new statute will make communities less safe by creating an unnecessary barrier between law enforcement officials and the immigrant community.

And yet, despite these serious concerns, supporters around the country, including here in Maryland, have hailed the legislation as a model to follow in their own states.

“Why don’t illegal immigrants just enter the country legally – like our ancestors did?” many ask. Unfortunately, our current immigration system too often hinders families instead of helping them. For example, wait times for visas can last many years, a frightening prospect for parents simply seeking to provide for and protect their children. As a result, individuals from nations like Mexico may have little or no opportunity to immigrate legally. This has created conditions that lead many to choose illegal immigration in an effort to provide for their families. Before we condemn them, it may be useful to ask ourselves what we would do were we faced with that situation.

Most, if not all American Catholics, owe their faith and citizenry to the perseverance of their ancestors who, as immigrants to this land, overcame persecution and prejudice as newcomers to this country. We must ask ourselves, “How would a law such as this have impacted their ability to remain in this country, provide for their family, contribute to this society and worship God as they desired?”

With such a history, it is not surprising that our Church today calls upon us as both Catholics and Americans to consider the issue of immigration reform from a heart that welcomes and respects newcomers to our country, especially when so often we find ourselves praying side by side with them as they join our parish communities.

In that vein, I offer in this small space a beginning framework that I hope will encourage Catholics in our Archdiocese to develop a greater understanding of the complex issue of immigration from the perspective of Church teaching, and inspire greater compassion as we consider the human lives at stake.

First, it may be helpful to acknowledge that various tenets of Church teaching regarding migration:

- The Church recognizes the right of individuals to migrate and the right of families to remain united. “Among man’s personal rights we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to be able to provide more fittingly for himself and his dependents,” Blessed John XXIII wrote in his encyclical “Pacem in Terris.”
- The Church also recognizes the right of nations to secure their borders and regulate immigration. “Political authorities, for sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions,” the Catechism notes.”

While the law must be respected, the family must also remain our concern. No longer should we tolerate a broken immigration system that often sets them in opposition. We need real immigration reform at the federal level, not draconian state-level laws that seek to fill the void through inadequate policing measures. We can have an immigration system that both promotes the good of the family and encourages compliance with the law, but our elected officials must have the political will to make this a reality.

We are conscious of extraordinary tensions in those border states where police have had difficulty controlling crime, leading to some frustration on the part of local residents.

The U.S. bishops have long advocated for comprehensive immigration reform that keeps immigrant families together, adopts smart and humane enforcement policies, and provides undocumented immigrants with a set of rules by which they can earn legal status and begin a path toward citizenship. Surely this is a better path than the one Arizona has just taken.

To learn more, go to [mdcathcon.org/immigration](http://mdcathcon.org/immigration) and [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org).