

Beyond Arizona law debate, common ground seen on immigration solutions

LOS ANGELES - The heated national debate over Arizona's tough new immigration law has drawn much-needed attention to calls for immigration reform, but it also has obscured the fact that there is "actual common ground" among Americans on "key elements" of reform, according to Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles.

The cardinal listed five elements that he said when presented to Americans elicited more agreement than he expected.

He said those elements are: the responsibilities of countries of origins of immigrants; a need for more secure borders; a balance between the need for workers and the supply of workers; agriculture jobs; and the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or the DREAM Act. The proposed measure would allow children of undocumented immigrants brought to the United States at an early age to become legal residents and qualify for in-state tuition.

Cardinal Mahony said the one area that "creates sharp divisions among us" is a discussion of the path those currently in this country illegally can take toward legal residency, he said.

Some Americans see any method to help people legalize their status as amnesty, commonly defined, he noted, as "a general pardon," or "a forgetting or overlooking of any past offense."

But immigrant advocates are not proposing a "general pardon, forgetting or overlooking of the past without penalty or stringent obligations," he explained. "Immigrants here without permission would be required to pay for their transgression and 'get right' with the law, then earn their way toward eventual citizenship. This is not amnesty."

He concluded by saying: "There is no excuse for inaction on what is perhaps the

country's most pressing social problem – all-inclusive immigration reform.”

Cardinal Mahony made the comments in a statement dated July 12. Catholic News Service received a copy of it July 15.

To his first point, about the responsibilities of other countries, the cardinal said: “The nations whose citizens must migrate to other countries for decent employment have the primary responsibility to provide economic development and decent job opportunities for their people.

“Too many national governments have simply not taken their responsibility seriously and have become part of the problem, rather than part of the solution,” he said.

“The majority of Americans want our government to pressure so-called ‘sending countries’ to increase significantly their economic development at home,” he said, adding that the United States needs international economic policies that “facilitate sustainable development in these sending countries.”

Next, Cardinal Mahony said, nearly everyone agrees that the United States “has not taken all of the steps possible to secure our national borders.”

But the concern is not just the U.S.-Mexican border, he said, but the U.S.-Canadian border and the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. He also noted that “countless visitors” come through U.S. airports on visas but never leave “when their visas expire,” he said.

The United States does not have the amount of money or personnel to make the borders impenetrable to those wanting to cross illegally, he said.

But he suggested part of the solution to security lies in immigration reform that would increase “the number of employment and family visas for unskilled workers, enabling them to migrate safely and legally through ports-of-entry.”

“Such a program must ensure that both the rights of United States and foreign-born workers are respected,” the cardinal said.

He pointed out that lawmakers and citizens alike seem to agree the agriculture

industry needs employees for irrigation, pruning, harvesting, packing and shipping.

To address the industry's cyclical need for workers, he said Congress must pass the Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity and Benefits, "which would legalize farm workers and streamline their entrance into the country."

He also said the DREAM Act should be passed because young people brought to the United States as youngsters by their undocumented parents "should not be penalized in their own education" and their advancement in education and job skills is needed for the nation's future workforce.

Cardinal Mahony said that to address the status of the 12 million undocumented immigrants currently in the country, any reform measure must require them to register with the federal government, to pay fines and all taxes, and to learn conversational English.

Once these requirements are met, he said, these individuals would be granted permanent residence status. They would wait another five years to apply for citizenship, like other permanent residents, and would have to demonstrate writing and reading proficiency in English, know U.S. history and meet all other requirements.