

Bumper Sticker Ethics

The Catholic Review

In the recent Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Benedict XVI invites us to advance the new evangelization in the context of migration by “seeking ways of fraternal sharing and respectful proclamation, overcoming opposition and nationalism. For their part, the Churches of origin, of transit and those that welcome the migration flows should find ways to increase their cooperation for the benefit of those who depart and those who arrive, and, in any case, of those who, on their journey, stand in need of encountering the merciful face of Christ in the welcome given to one’s neighbor.”

Here in our Archdiocese, our Church answers the Pope’s call by assuming responsibility as a Church of “welcome.” For many migrants who live, worship, work and study among us, whether documented or undocumented, ours is the face of Christ. Yet when it comes to anyone living among us illegally, some, including faithful Catholics, distort that face with a mask of distrust and hard-heartedness.

The ability of Maryland Catholics to put the call of their faith before their politics will be greatly tested when the so-called Maryland DREAM Act appears on the ballot of next November’s general election. The Act allows some immigrant children living in Maryland, who were brought here illegally by their parents, to pay in-state tuition at public colleges. The law was petitioned to referendum earlier this year after it was enacted by the state legislature a few months earlier.

Of course there is much more to it than illegal immigrants getting “special treatment” or “discounted” tuition – the overly-simplistic and misleading bottom line opponents of the Act proclaim to voters. The details, they’d argue, aren’t necessary to know. No, all one need to hear is illegal, right? After all, anything else is irrelevant. Never mind that:

- Each student must have attended a Maryland high school for at least three years and graduated from one in order to qualify;

- Each student must come from a family that has filed Maryland income taxes every year while they are in high school, every year in college, and every year in between in order to qualify;
- Each student must commit to legalizing his or her status as soon as they are eligible in order to qualify; and
- The DREAM Act creates in-state status for active-duty military families residing in Maryland as well as veterans who register within four years of discharge.

Opponents of the measure do not want these details shared because they know many who view the Act through their “Illegal is Illegal” lens might see the situation through new “eyes.”

But as polls continue to indicate, the opinions of Maryland voters on this issue – including those of Maryland Catholics – change dramatically when they learn these facts. Far from giving these students “special treatment,” the Act imposes numerous requirements to allow them to qualify for the same tuition rate as other Maryland students. Indeed, our Maryland bill is stricter than any of the similar measures passed by 11 other states.

Aside from these facts, voters need to consider that many of the students who would benefit from the DREAM Act were raised in the United States, educated in our schools, have grown up speaking English, and consider America to be their home country. Voters should also consider that the DREAM Act affects children who are in America through no choice of their own. And, as many argue, since these children have spent most of their lives in Maryland schools, it is only fair that they should be treated the same and have the same opportunities, if qualified, as others.

For Catholic voters, we are reminded of our oft-touted obligation to treat strangers, widows, orphans and all vulnerable persons with justice and compassion, and of the Gospel call to recognize the dignity of the human person and promote the welfare of families.

Most of us can agree that the rule of law is the foundation of a civilized society and that we must not encourage illegal behavior by people who knowingly break the law.

However, we can also agree that the solution to our country's broken immigration system is not to penalize undocumented children who were brought here by their parents. Denying these young people, who have worked hard and have much to offer, the same chance as their classmates to gain access to a college education will deny all of society the benefit of ensuring that they can one day achieve their dream of becoming valued and productive members of our community.

As Catholics, we believe that all of our neighbors, including the stranger, deserve our welcome and compassion. It may not fit on a bumper sticker, but it's the "bottom line" for what we believe.