

Catholic leaders hopeful that Obama will change US immigration policy

MEXICO CITY - Senior Catholic leaders participating in the Sixth World Meeting of Families expressed optimism that the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama would usher in more favorable immigration policies that include putting an end to the workplace raids that often separate parents from their children.

“There are many aspects that have to be considered, but I hope that the new president will have the cooperation of the Senate and other bodies to think deeply about this question and the higher position of the United States,” Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, told Catholic News Service Jan. 15.

The archbishop added that the new U.S. administration had the opportunity to regain authority in the areas of “human rights, freedom and justice.”

His comments were echoed by others attending the Jan. 14-18 Vatican-sponsored meeting of families in Mexico City.

“We foresee and we hope that the new administration will organize migration in the right way, with contracts and limited-time (stays),” Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, told CNS.

The hope for changes in U.S. policy follows a period that has seen fear spread among migrants because of workplace raids; construction continue on a border fence between the United States and Mexico; and the inability of the outgoing

administration to achieve a comprehensive agreement on immigration issues. The current global economic crisis also is forcing many migrants to cut back on remittances that support families left behind in their home countries. Some migrants are even returning home because of diminished economic opportunities.

President Obama promised during his campaign to address the current U.S. immigration situation by providing an opportunity for undocumented migrants to become legal and promoting economic development in Mexico. He also promised to beef up security on the southern border and discourage illegal immigration by cracking down on businesses violating immigration laws.

In a Jan. 12 statement after President Obama met with Mexican President Felipe Calderon - whose country last year scrapped prison terms for undocumented migrants detained while traveling through Mexico on their way north - a spokesman said Obama was committed to fixing "the broken U.S. immigration system and fostering safe, legal and orderly migration."

A Mexican political party's committee for migrant issues said recently that 738,000 migrants were deported from the United States in 2008; more than 400,000 of them were Mexicans. At least 100,000 of the Mexican deportees were children.

Cardinal Rodriguez said the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa helps with the repatriation of the estimated 50,000 deportees arriving in Honduras every year by providing spiritual support and "a little bit of money" so they can return to their communities of origin.

In spite of a deteriorating U.S. economy, which affects Honduras by diminishing the flow of remittances, migrants still leave his country, the cardinal said.

"We urge them to stay ... (but) there's no work," the cardinal said.

Bishop Raul Vera Lopez of Saltillo said he sees a similar situation in his northern Mexican diocese as the economy is faltering and maquiladoras, or factories, are laying off workers. He told CNS that the situation “is damaging families enormously” because women and children are often left behind with little support when workers leave for the U.S.

Regardless of U.S. immigration policy, Catholic leaders said the church’s support of migrants and the families that are left behind would remain unchanged.

Archbishop Marchetto told the delegates in Mexico City that the church had an obligation to continue serving the needs of migrants, “who wrongly sometimes have decided to leave” but require pastoral attention and material support as they make their journeys.