

Death of a bill: Senators kill legislation to reform immigration

WASHINGTON – The day after Hispanic congressmen gathered with priests and Hispanic families to pray that wisdom be granted to members of the Senate, a bipartisan bill to reform immigration failed to garner the votes needed to move into voting on the issue.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., a member of the Hispanic Congressional Caucus, led a news conference on the terrace of the Cannon House Office Building on the morning of June 27. He said the purpose of the assembly was “so that together with our prayers we can enlighten the Senate of the United States and encourage people to have the courage to do what is right and what is correct.”

Gutierrez and Rep. Joe Baca, D-Calif., along with religious leaders, spoke in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, a topic Gutierrez called a “moral issue.”

But June 28 the Senate, after weeks of debate, failed to pass a bill that would have established a path toward citizenship for millions of illegal immigrants already in the United States while strengthening border security. The vote to limit debate and proceed to a vote on the bill was 14 votes short of the 60 it needed, with a vote of 46-53 in favor of limiting the debate.

Catholic reaction to the failed attempt to pass the immigration bill has been largely negative.

Bishop Gerald R. Barnes of San Bernardino, Calif., issued a statement June 29 as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration, saying the bishops were troubled by the failure to reform the immigration system. He called the current state of the system “morally unacceptable.”

“The U.S. bishops shall continue to point out the moral deficiencies in the immigration system and work toward justice until it is achieved,” he said.

Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, called the Senate’s

inability to agree on comprehensive immigration reform a “monumental failure for our country.” He lamented the unchanged fate of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants who live in fear of deportation.

“Today’s action to give up on the bill leaves in place the status quo – a deeply flawed, untenable and much-criticized immigration system that is (in) desperate need of reform,” Father Snyder said in a statement.

Opponents of the bill, mostly Republicans, refused to approve the legislation because they said strengthening border security should be a prerequisite to expediting the legalization of millions of immigrants.

Speakers at the Hispanic caucus’ news conference argued that the immigration system, as it currently exists, damages immigrant families. An immigration system that splits up families is wrong, Gutierrez said.

“Our families are the cornerstone of society,” he said.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles also issued a statement about the failed bill, which he said would have affirmed human dignity for immigrants. He echoed the message of those at the news conference, saying that the current system contributes to the separation of families.

“Every day that this status quo is permitted to exist is a moral failure for our nation, as well as a legislative one,” he said.

Although most analysts predict that the issue of immigration reform will not come to a vote again until after the 2008 elections, Father Snyder encouraged Congress to rise above partisan politics to deliver a solution this year.

Cardinal Mahony acknowledged it is unlikely that the Senate will take up the immigration topic again in the next few months but said the Catholic Church would remain active in supporting effective immigration reform legislation.

Gutierrez expressed confidence that religious communities would play the role of advocate for immigrants on social justice issues as they have done in the past – such as for civil rights for African-Americans in the 1960s. And the government should

listen, he said, because it has a responsibility to protect immigrants.

“We will stand up in every church across this country to say that our government has a responsibility to defend the most vulnerable of our society,” Gutierrez said. “And the most vulnerable of our society today is our immigrant community – our undocumented community.”

At the caucus’ news conference, speakers refuted the idea that illegal immigration is limited to the U.S.-Mexican border. Many of them interspersed their English with Spanish, but stressed that the immigration debate is not just a Hispanic issue, but rather an issue that affects all Americans.

“Immigration is not just a Hispanic issue, or an Irish issue. It isn’t just an African issue; it isn’t just an Asian issue,” Baca said. “It isn’t an issue specific to one group of people nor is it an issue specific to any one place. It’s not just about security issues, agricultural issues, business issues – it’s America’s issue.”

Irish-born Father Brendan McBride, coordinator of the Irish Immigration Pastoral Center in San Francisco, and Father Michael Leonard of the Chicago Irish Immigrant Support Center, who is also a native of Ireland, told the mostly Hispanic group that – as Irish Catholics – they could empathize with the experience of prejudice and exclusion.

“We understand the hurt of not being able to travel back for a funeral, of not being able to travel home for a wedding,” Father McBride said. He said the Catholic community would keep the fight for comprehensive immigration reform alive.

Before the measure died in the Senate, Gutierrez had expressed confidence that the immigration bill would proceed to the House, but warned Republicans that the patience of the immigrant community was running out. The members of the immigrant community, he said, are not “hordes of people that have come here to destroy our American way of life,” as he said some people claim.

“We are hardworking people that want an opportunity to contribute even better to America,” Gutierrez said.