

Immigration a Test of Faith

By Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien

For many Catholics, there are some issues on which the Church's teaching is difficult to accept. Immigration is seemingly one of these issues. Yet the underpinning for this teaching is the same that justifies our "position" on many other issues so often deemed obvious or "cut and dry" by the very same people.

As people of faith, we are called each day to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us in all our decisions. At the same time, as citizens, we are called to live by the laws and civil order of our state and country. In following the law of the land as faithful Catholics, we must abide, respect and protect our civil law, order and system of justice. Yet, we must remember that, above all, we are called to a higher natural law of love and human dignity. This higher natural law that Christ has given us is the supreme and one truth: that God is love itself, truth itself, and that we are - each and every one of us - His children, who literally and figuratively form the very body of Christ himself. This is not a platitude; rather it is the eternal truth.

It is through the lens of this truth that we approach various legislative measures, including those dealing with the issue of immigration during this session of the Maryland General Assembly. Immigration presents particularly difficult issues where we must work to harmonize two sometimes conflicting principles, among others. We recognize the principle that our nation must protect and safeguard its borders. But we also suggest the more fundamental principle that, when the essential needs of people cannot be met in their homeland, those same people have the right to seek relief abroad, in order to support themselves and their families. Illegal immigration is by no means promoted, yet we cannot simply turn our back when it comes to serving the basic needs of those who have come to our country, like every generation before them, seeking a better life.

Many argue that those past generations - who for many of us include our grandparents and even our parents - came to this country through legal channels. But today's immigration system is far different. Fraught with problems and backlogs, it is nearly impossible for all but a small percentage of immigrants to

navigate the present system properly. Others also claim that immigrants are an economic drain on our communities, without acknowledging how greatly they contribute to our country. According to the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., national statistics indicate that:

- Immigrants pay more than \$90 million in taxes;
- Each immigrant pays \$80,000 more in taxes over a lifetime than he or she receives in public benefits;
- The federal government earns \$10 billion each year in federal taxes from immigrants;
- Immigrants contribute \$7 billion to Social Security each year.

Until our federal government addresses comprehensive immigration reform, so that immigrants who are now present illegally in our country can follow a reasonable pathway to obtain work visas or citizenship, we are called to approach this situation humanely.

Consider the words of Pope John Paul II: “In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community.” (Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996)

In this frame of mind, we as Catholics advocate for legislation that would ensure that immigrants in Maryland are treated fairly and with dignity both in our daily encounters and also in public policy, especially where immigrant children are involved. For this reason, we oppose legislation that would require local law enforcement agencies to enforce complicated federal immigration laws. Such measures create undue hardships on undocumented immigrants, and undermine important relationships of trust between local law enforcement and immigrant communities. We also oppose other measures that target immigrants by imposing

complicated requirements for proof of residency when accessing public benefit programs. Undocumented immigrants often are already ineligible to receive these benefits, and such laws only hinder those who are here in the country legally, such as the homeless, regardless of whether they are immigrants or not.

We also support measures to ensure that Maryland high school graduates, who are immigrants largely brought to this country by their parents and through no fault of their own, are made eligible to receive in-state tuition at Maryland's state colleges and universities if they meet certain conditions, including, among others: graduating and attending a Maryland high school for two years or more, providing proof that their parent or guardian has had state income taxes withheld during the year prior to their high school graduation, and signing an affidavit that they will apply for permanent legal residency within 30 days of becoming eligible. This legislation would not affect the merit-based decisions in the admissions process. For these children, Maryland is their reality - their past, present, and, they hope, their future. They deserve the same opportunity to realize their God-given potential as their fellow Maryland classmates.

Please pray that we may all, in our private lives and in our public advocacy, put on Christ and reflect his love especially in the challenges we face in working, living, learning and praying with our immigrant brothers and sisters.