

# Many Cultures | Una Familia: ‘Why don’t they come here legally?’

**Maria T.P. Johnson**

*Director of the archdiocesan Office of Hispanic Ministries.*

Two weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend a conference sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. More than 200 participants from around the country, including bishops, priests, advocates, immigration lawyers and pastoral ministers, gathered in Salt Lake City to study and discuss the current situation of immigrants in the 50 states.

There were panelists from the Department of Homeland Security, the National Immigration Law Center, Women’s Refugee Commission and the Center for Religious Immigration and Protection, among others. The purpose of the gathering was to look at what state legislatures are doing to attempt to correct a federal unwillingness to reform immigration laws. Most states focus on punitive action, as they do not have the authority to work for comprehensive reform. Consequently, some states have created humanitarian, civil rights and economic crises. I will not attempt to summarize the situation but rather address one point in the divisive debate surrounding illegal immigration, the common question, to paraphrase, “Why don’t they come here legally?”

There are an estimated 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States. Fifty percent are from Mexico. Another 20 percent are from other Latin American countries; 15 percent are from Africa, 10 percent come from South and East Asia combined, and 5 percent from Europe. Unauthorized workers comprise more than 5 percent of the U.S. workforce. Many understandably ask why these millions of unauthorized immigrants did not seek to come to the United States lawfully. Why didn’t they just “stand in line” and wait for their turn?

For the large majority of unauthorized immigrants, no such “line” exists, there is no

turn. Under current immigration laws, lawful immigration is restricted to only a few narrow categories of people. Most current unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States are ineligible to enter legally for the purpose of living and working in the country.

There are various immigration categories for workers to be sponsored by a U.S.-based employer. However, these categories are limited to multinational executives and professors; those with advanced degrees; the exceptional in the arts, sciences or business; and narrowly-defined, specialized workers.

Today's unauthorized immigrants are largely low-skilled workers who come to the United States for work to support their families. They work in the agricultural, meatpacking, landscaping, service and construction industries.

Over the past several decades, the demand by U.S. businesses large and small for low-skilled workers has grown immensely, while the supply of available workers for low-skilled jobs has diminished. Some 300,000 immigrants enter the United States unlawfully each year and find work. Yet, there are only 5,000 permits available annually for low-skilled workers.

The truth is, the economy not only needs them, but would collapse without this influx of young workers. Socially, immigrants have been and are a natural resource for renewal and improvement. Our tax system and social security needs them and while they are indispensable, some don't want their children to go to college, purchase health insurance, or obtain driver's licenses.

Salt Lake City Bishop John C. Wester, talking about the insecurity, fear and discrimination that these unauthorized immigrants endure, quoted Winston Churchill, who once said, "Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing, after they have exhausted all other possibilities."

I would say that Americans would do the right thing, if they only knew the truth.