

People move, things change, families matter: Thinking through the issue of immigration

Given last week's confusing stream of Trump-related immigration news and the candidate's announcements that today he will both travel to Mexico to meet its president and give a major immigration policy speech in Arizona, I thought I'd offer my own thoughts on the issue.

It is, of course, a really tough one – one that seems to be ever-controversial, ever-divisive, and ever able to lose you friends and win you enemies. It can take misunderstandings, resentments, fears, frustrations, and economic and cultural insecurities and tie them up into tight, tricky knots.

Yet I think the issue is one that is especially worth pondering.

Below you'll find my thought process on the matter, which is based, yes, on my years of immigrant advocacy on the behalf of the Catholic Church in Maryland – but more importantly, on my years of honest (and sometimes painful) self-reflection and prayer.

Let's begin.



A girl smiles during a gathering of reunited refugee immigrant families who attended a December 2015 Posada at the Catholic Center in Baltimore. (CR File)

1) People have always moved. Through all of human history, people have moved from place to place seeking food, security, better living conditions, and more freedom. Time and time again, they have fled famine, war, and persecution. They always will.

2) People deserve a chance to protect and provide for themselves and their families. There are still plenty of places in the world where hunger and war abound. There are more where corruption or drought or poor economic conditions stymie individuals' abilities to provide their families with an adequate living.

I would move to a different part of the world if doing so would protect my family and secure my future. You would too.

3) Things change. My family has lived in Maryland for more than 10

generations. The first came here in the 1630s, the last came during the American Revolution. Other than being of Native American ancestry, I'm about as "native" as you can get. But in reality, my family lives in a very different place today than it did in the past. Maryland has changed visibly since I was a child; it has changed dramatically since my parents were children.

Not long ago, Maryland was the kind of sparsely-populated place where the same handful of family names were seen, time and again, on businesses and place names and headstones. Today it is mostly populated by people who came from someplace else. They came from different parts of the country and far-flung parts of the world. They drove massive development. They brought their own foods and languages and preferences and opinions. They made this place their own. Nevermind the families whose names still grace the towns and street signs: we have been relegated to the past.

That's how it goes. Things change. Newcomers come and they become our friends and neighbors and eventually, our family. (I happen to have married one of them.) They build businesses and give us jobs. They bring their skills and come to work for us. In some communities they drive up costs to the point where we can no longer afford to live there. But they also drive growth in ways that benefit us all.

In my heart I am a rural, small-town girl. I love my family, I am interested in our history, and the biggest part of me wants to live in a place where both are obviously present. It wants to live amongst people who share my values and my tastes.

But things change. The old kind of community of my fantasies (and my family's past) isn't here anymore. I can let that frustrate and sadden me, or I can find the good in the way things have become. I choose to seek out the silver linings. I choose to cultivate that part of myself that rejoices in new experiences.

Yes, immigration will change our country. It has many times over. And yes, I can understand how that is an uncomfortable, even frightening prospect for some people. Sometimes I feel it too. But things change. At the end of the day, we can't stop change from happening. We can only control how we react to it.

4) Laws change. The United States is a nation of immigrants. All of our ancestors, at some point or another, came here from someplace else. The vast majority came in just the past 200 years. It seems to me that most of us have this idea that our own families arrived in careful consideration of American immigration law – that they waited their turn and filed all the proper applications and did everything By The Books. But that's just not the case.

The kind of complicated immigration system we have today is a product of the past few decades. Until the 1920's, American immigration was wide-open to almost all Europeans. Nearly everyone who arrived at Ellis Island was approved for entry. In the wake of World War I, immigration laws became more restrictive. Later, they

became more complicated.

Today, immigrants gain legal entry to the United States in three primary ways: (1) through the sponsorship of a close family member, (2) through the sponsorship of an employer, and (3) through the Diversity Lottery, which is designed to favor immigration from countries less well-represented in the first two avenues. People from countries that send a lot of emigrants to the United States via family or employer sponsorship are ineligible to apply for the Diversity Lottery. In 2016, people from the following countries are NOT eligible to apply for the Diversity Lottery: Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, China (mainland-born), Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, South Korea, United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland) and its dependent territories, and Vietnam.

So if I'm from England or Canada or Mexico or the Philippines and I don't have a close family member or a prospective employer in the United States to sponsor my immigration, I can't go. There is no line to wait in. There is no application to fill out. There is no such thing as "legal" immigration for me.

This is entirely different from the system under which my ancestors - and most Americans' - came to the United States. Our ancestors had wide-open ports or lines at Ellis Island. They had a chance to seek their fortune in an entirely new land with no one to depend upon other than themselves. That system simply cannot be equated to today's.

When I used to testify on immigration matters, I would tell legislators that my last ancestor to arrive in America was a Hessian soldier paid to fight against the Americans in the War of Independence. And I'd quip, "How much more illegal can you get than that?"



A young man holds a crucifix as he and other immigrants attend Mass on the U.S. side of the border in El Paso, Texas, Feb. 17. The pope celebrated the final Mass of his Mexico visit in Ciudad Juarez. About 550 guests situated on a levee north of the Rio Grande in Texas took part in the Mass. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

5) Families matter. It is right that people can sponsor close family members to immigrate into the United States. But the system should be better at ensuring that sponsorship actually results in a successful and timely family reunification. As it is, the immigration system is so backlogged that reunification can take years. It can take five years** for a legal permanent resident to bring his or her spouse or minor child into the country. It can take twenty years for a U.S. citizen to bring his or her

adult sibling here. (Here is an interesting story about efforts to bring over the adult children of Filipino veterans who fought for the U.S. Armed Services in World War II.)

The family is the most fundamental unit of society. It's just basic human decency to allow spouses, siblings, and parents/children to be together. Can you imagine having to live without your spouse or small child for five years? Your siblings or adult children for a decade or even two?

6) Skills matter. It is also right that employers can sponsor workers who will bring vital skills and knowledge to their companies. There should be more of this. There should also be more opportunities for entrepreneurs to come and establish their own businesses in this country. The United States' success has, in large part, been due to our entrepreneurial spirit and our culture of encouraging ingenuity and innovation. We should unabashedly pursue the immigration of people who will feed that spirit and culture.

7) The labor market doesn't lie. When millions of people can come into the United States and find work despite their legal ineligibility to do so, it is proof that the labor market can support them. At the same time, it is understandable that low-skilled Americans would be fearful of competition from an influx of similarly-skilled immigrant workers - especially when those workers' under-the-table employment has been depressing wages. I am sympathetic towards those in that position. But I am also hopeful that higher numbers of legal workers would encourage higher wages, more entrepreneurial activity, more business, and better opportunities for all.

8) Long borders will never be 100 percent secure. The U.S. border with Mexico is nearly 2,000 miles long - just about equal to the length of the East Coast. It goes through deserts and rivers, remote areas and urban ones. And that's just the Mexican border - the one on which Mr. Trump wants to build his wall. Undoubtedly, border security can be improved. Even just fully-funding current programs would help. But insisting that immigration reform wait on complete border security is another way of saying reform should never happen.

9) We should encourage immigrants to invest themselves in this country. I want people living in the United States to feel like they have a stake in its success. I want people to feel a connection to their communities. I want them to work hard, start businesses, pay taxes, buy houses, volunteer, report crimes, and help their neighbors. We encourage investment when we enable families to be together, when we bring people out of the shadows of illegal immigration, and when we provide people with an opportunity to someday become citizens. It is a terrible idea to

legalize a person's immigration status without providing them a path to citizenship. That sends the message, "We want your labor, but we don't want you."

So.

In sum, I'm in favor of immigration reform. But not just that - I'm in favor of more immigration. That's not a popular thing to say these days and I guess I can understand why. I think I can understand, too, why so many are unwilling to accept the levels of immigration (legal and otherwise) our country is currently experiencing.

But I feel honor-bound to step back and look for the bigger picture and work on bringing my heart into line with my mind: People have always moved. People deserve a chance to protect and provide for themselves and their families. Things change. Laws change. Families matter. Skills matter. The labor market doesn't lie. Long borders will never be 100% secure. We should encourage immigrants to invest themselves in this country.

I believe these points to be truths. They lead me to where I stand.

Now let's see what Mr. Trump has to say about his latest stand.

*This post is adapted from one titled The Immigration Question, which appeared on my personal blog, These Walls.

**All time estimates are from when I was working and keeping up on such things. They may have changed somewhat in the years since.