

Religious leaders denounce Arizona immigration bill, urge its veto

WASHINGTON - Arizona's three bishops and Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony have joined those urging Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer to veto legislation that the cardinal called "the country's most retrogressive, mean-spirited and useless anti-immigrant law."

The Arizona Legislature on April 19 sent Brewer a bill that would require police to ask people they encounter in routine activities for immigration documents. It also would, in Arizona at least, make it a crime to be in the country illegally. Federal law considers that a violation of civil codes, not a crime.

The bishops joined in a letter from a dozen religious leaders urging Brewer to veto the bill that they said "may actually scare off potential employers and employees looking to come to Arizona," and threaten public safety by making immigrants afraid to have contact with police, even to report crimes.

It was signed by Bishops Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix and James S. Wall of Gallup, N.M., whose diocese includes parts of northern Arizona, as well as the Rev. Jan Olav Flaaten, a Lutheran minister who is executive director of the Arizona Ecumenical Council. Also signing the letter were leaders of Arizona Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Methodist and Jewish organizations.

Brewer had five days to sign or veto the bill. As of April 21 she had not tipped her hand as to her intentions but said April 19 that she had concerns about the bill. She did not elaborate but said she would review the legislation and seek advice about its

constitutionality and other aspects, Arizona newspapers reported.

In their letter, the clergy told Brewer they were concerned the bill “could make felons, not only out of dangerous criminals (as is warranted), but also the many undocumented immigrants who have come to this country at a very young age and have no familiarity with any other country but the United States. We are concerned for these children and for families that may have a mother and a father, one of whom is a citizen and the other of whom would now be considered a criminal.”

The letter acknowledged that “a veto of this bill would require great political courage on your part. We want you to know, however, that we are willing to stand behind you in taking such an action, so that our state is better served.”

Under the headline “Arizona’s dreadful anti-immigrant law,” Cardinal Mahony wrote on his blog April 18 that “the tragedy of the law is its totally flawed reasoning: that immigrants come to our country to rob, plunder and consume public resources. That is not only false, the premise is nonsense.”

“What led the Arizona Legislature to pass such a law,” he continued, “is so obvious to all of us who have been working for federal comprehensive immigration reform: The present immigration system is completely incapable of balancing our nation’s need for labor and the supply of that labor.

“We have built a huge wall along our southern border, and have posted in effect two signs next to each other. One reads, ‘No Trespassing,’ and the other reads, ‘Help Wanted.’ The ill-conceived Arizona law does nothing to balance our labor needs,” he wrote.

Cardinal Mahony said the bill wrongly assumes that Arizonans, including local law enforcement personnel, “will now shift their total attention to guessing which Latino-looking or foreign-looking person may or may not have proper documents.

That's also nonsense."

Federal law does not require immigrants or citizens to carry identification or proof of their legal status at all times.

Various cities and states "have tried such abhorrent tactics over the decades with absolutely no positive effect," the cardinal continued. "Such laws have all been struck down by courts or repealed by wise citizens. Sadly, such laws lead to a new round of immigrant-bashing - usually in times of economic downturn."

He called for efforts to "bring calm and reasoning to discussions about our immigrant brothers and sisters."

From Arizona and across the nation, civil rights, law enforcement and immigrant-aid organizations denounced the legislation. The president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund said the organization would sue to stop the law from taking effect if Brewer should sign it.

Some of the support in Arizona for passing the legislation heated up after the late March murder of southern Arizona rancher Robert Krentz, who was shot on his ranch near the Mexican border. No arrest has been made, but police suspect drug traffickers who traverse the border were responsible.

Bishop Kicanas presided at the funeral Mass for Krentz, writing about it on his weekly blog.

He quoted Krentz's wife, Susan, noting that "people who attended the funeral Mass may have come with anger and fear, but I know they left with a powerful message from Susan, 'We cling to forgiveness, demand justice and stand strong in faith.' "