

Reflection Paper on the Immigration Problem in the United States

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As I reflect on the Church's role concerning the immigration issue, it occurred to me that there wouldn't be an illegal immigration problem if global poverty did not exist. The level of poverty south of the border and around the world is greater than the poverty in the United States. In some way, illegal immigration may be forcing the United States to reap what it has sown. Much of the global poverty that exists on this planet can be blamed on the United States of America. The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world and we still wield much power in the global economy despite the fact that we are also a nation in tremendous debt. Poor people everywhere who hear of the wealthy nation called the United States of America look at this nation as the nation where they can make their dreams come true, or at least their children can make their dreams come true. What parent doesn't want a better life for her or his child? The United States represents the land of opportunity, and with the statue of liberty stating, "Give me your poor huddled masses yearning to be free," poor people around the globe long to move to the United States to begin a completely new life, a life they hope will be free of poverty.

The Church must obey fundamental doctrines represented in scripture. A Christian congregation that does not adhere to scriptural doctrines might need to question whether it should call itself a church. One of the doctrines the Church must obey is the doctrine of hospitality. Represented by several scriptures (I shall cite a few; Genesis 18: 1-8, Exodus 2: 20-21, II Samuel 9: 1-13, II Kings 4: 8-10, Matthew 7: 7-12, St. John 6: 1-13, Acts 16: 13-15, Revelation 3: 20), hospitality is a major theme in scripture. The Israelites were commanded to be kind to immigrants and to treat them as if they were citizens. "Love him as you love yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Leviticus 19: 33-34). "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him/her, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 22: 21). The Lord commanded Israel to be kind to immigrants and there were no laws that governed entrance into the nation. Foreigners could come and go as they pleased.

However, even in the bible, citizenship means something. A citizen of Israel had rights and privileges noncitizens did not enjoy in spite of Leviticus 19: 33-34. A non-Israelite male had to be circumcised to become a citizen of Israel as well as agree to serve the Lord. In the United States, citizenship means something. We get to vote. We get to work at least for minimum wage. We have rights even when arrested for a crime. We can live anywhere we can afford to live. We enjoy freedom of religion. All children who are citizens have to go to school, are required to get an education, until the age of sixteen. Our food is scrutinized by the government for safety, even pet food. We have access to medical care if we can afford it or if it is an emergency. We enjoy freedom of speech. We can get help to start our own businesses in this nation. We can obtain permits to hold protests. We enjoy freedom of assembly. We have the right to bear arms. If women with children can't get a job, they can receive welfare. As a matter of fact, the mother doesn't have to be a citizen of this nation. If her children are born here, she is eligible for welfare so that she can provide for her children who are citizens.

The poor in this nation are richer than the poor in the rest of the world. If the poor in the rest of the world are at the bottom, there is no place for them to go but up. For a lot of poor people

who live near this nation, up is setting foot on U.S. soil. The poor people who are successful at crossing the border into this country are willing to work for less than minimum wage, but what they earn here is still more, in most cases much more, than what they could earn in their own countries. The ability of poor people from other countries to enter this nation is what makes illegal immigration a problem. It takes money to enter this nation legally. It takes money for an immigrant to become a citizen. There are smugglers who will smuggle people across our borders for a fee. The poor who can come up with the fee are smuggled across our borders. The poor who are unable to save enough money to pay the fee take their chances sneaking across our borders on their own. Many enter our nation safely, but some do not.

However the poor get here, those with families can in no way afford to apply for citizenship. They are cursed to be labeled illegal immigrants. As long as they agree to work for less than minimum wage, they will never be able to afford to apply for citizenship. In the meantime, illegal immigrants, working for less than minimum wage, undermine the ability of citizens to negotiate for higher wages. Illegal immigrants do not pay income taxes. Their employers pay them in cash. Yet, they enjoy just about everything provided by our tax dollars. They benefit from police and fire protection. They benefit from well paved streets and highways. Their children benefit from tax revenues that go to public schools. They can go to medical clinics funded by our taxes. They enjoy the protection our military provides to the entire nation.

Illegal immigrants make no contribution to any benefits provided by income tax revenues because their employers don't deduct income taxes from their pay which encourages employers to operate illegally. Their employers do not take social security out of their pay. What happens to them when they get too old to perform manual labor? Illegal immigrants who desire to make large sums of money in this nation are tempted to get involved in the illegal narcotics racket or commit other crimes. All poor people are tempted to make money illegally, but when illegal immigrants break the law, tax payers pay for the man hours it takes law enforcement to solve the crime, prosecute the offenders, and then deport them. Illegal immigrants do not carry automobile insurance. When they cause an automobile accident, the victim's insurance company has to repair the victim's car.

While numerous problems and examples of exploitation could be expressed, in the midst of all of the problems caused by illegal immigration and in the midst of all the problems caused by employers who exploit illegal immigrants, the Church is obligated to offer hospitality to the stranger. Should being illegal make a difference? Not in terms of helping anybody in need, but as Christian citizens of the United States, aren't we obligated to obey the laws of the land? In the thirteenth chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul encourages us to submit to governing authorities "for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Romans 13: 1). One responsibility of government is to protect the rights and privileges of citizenship and we all know that the government expects us to help protect our citizenship.

While there are congregations eager to help illegal immigrants when they come across the border with food, clothes, temporary shelter, and maybe even some medical care, responsible citizens would report illegal immigrants they help to the authorities. There are those who will be quick to say that if the immigrants are from Mexico, if they report the immigrants to the authorities and the immigrants are deported, those same immigrants will return at their earliest opportunity. Illegal immigration, reporting the illegal immigrants to the authorities, deportation, and the return of the deported immigrants, it is all just a revolving door. Why waste time reporting illegal immigrants? I would like to make a suggestion to consider.

I strongly believe that Christian citizens have the right to influence politics and should actively participate in politics. The Christian Right has the right idea, the wrong agenda, but the right idea. Christian citizens should influence politics and Christians should hold elected officials accountable for their service, or the lack thereof. If there is an organization that can help the government produce fair and effective immigration policies, it is the Church. If there is an organization that can help the government produce righteous foreign policies, it is the Church. The greatest knowledge I have gained from the Civil rights Movement is that the Church can make the government do right. Granted, there is separation of church and state in this country, but as citizens, we can rely on our Christian faith to help us make political decisions and to help our government make political decisions.

It has been noted by all United States citizens trying to find a solution to illegal immigration that we have at least twelve million illegal immigrants in our nation and it is impossible to deport them all. President Bush has a plan that makes sense to me. The President would like to get all illegal immigrants documented and placed on a track to citizenship. They can pay for their entrance into the process toward citizenship in monthly installments automatically deducted from their pay by their employers, along with income taxes and social security. Opponents of this plan call it amnesty for the immigrants, but I have never known amnesty to come with a price. By its very nature, amnesty is free. Therefore, real amnesty is what we're doing now about 12 million illegal immigrants in our nation, NOTHING.