



DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER
Secretariat for Administration and Community Affairs

A Message to the Catholics of New Hampshire

Long ago, the Lord established a rule of justice to be followed by His People in their dealings with strangers. *“You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the native-born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself, for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt”* (Book of Leviticus). Conscious that this command applies to us, His people, I invite you to think about one of the most contentious issues facing our nation today: immigration. More precisely, I want to reflect with you about the attitude we Catholics ought to have concerning undocumented immigrants living here in our state and country.

This reflection and word of encouragement is prompted by the tenor of the ongoing national debate and its effect on life here in New Hampshire. To listen to the way this issue is being discussed, one would scarcely recognize that the undocumented immigrant in this country is a flesh and blood human being — an individual like us, with a spouse and children, with hopes and fears. In New Hampshire legislation has been proposed to deny undocumented immigrants any right to enter into an enforceable contract, even a contract to buy goods or to obtain housing. In the midst of heated arguments surrounding immigration legislation here and around our nation, the natural human rights of undocumented immigrants are rarely considered to be their natural rights.

I am surprised and even disheartened that this is the case. After all, we Americans are the children of immigrants. Our ancestors landed on these shores years ago in a different era of documentation for immigrants. Our blessings today are the fruit of their endurance and hard labor. The freedom and prosperity we enjoy today developed from the deprivations they endured in being separated from the families they left to experience a better life here. As one old Irish song on emigration captures it:

*“And when I am bidding my last farewell,
The tears like rain shall blind,
For to think of my friends in my own native land,
And the home that I’m leaving behind.
And if I’m to die on some far foreign shore
And be buried so far, far away,*

*No fond mother's tears will be shed o'er my grave
On the shores of Americay."*

As we face the immigration problems of the twenty-first century, our memories of what our family members suffered should be ever-present as we ponder what steps our state and our nation should take. To paraphrase a recent song on emigration, we who have ascended the ladder ought to look down below to see the place from where we came.

Sitting on my desk is a small sculpture of our Lord washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. While doing this, he directed them: "What I have done for you, so you must do for one another." He gives us the same mandate today. To be true to his direction we cannot let the passion of debate about immigration blind us to the realities today's immigrants are suffering. While we need a reasonable national immigration policy, the solutions we advocate ought to be informed by Christian compassion and mirror our respect for human dignity, human rights, and human need.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States have urged Congress to establish of a more orderly immigration system, one which takes into consideration the current realities of undocumented immigrants, our country's resources, and the just application of civil law. They offer five basic principles, ones which help to build the foundation of an immigration system that is reasonable and just:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland;
2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families;
3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders;
4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection;
5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

As our nation moves forward in addressing this critical human concern, we who bear the name Catholic and Christian carry a tremendous responsibility of bringing to the discussion our foundational belief of the obligation to help one another – "our neighbor." Justice and mercy, compassion and respect are hallmarks of the Kingdom of God in the present day. Daily, we pray "thy kingdom come." Being members of the Kingdom, may we extend the riches of our nation to others – those who come to join us in seeking a better life for their families and themselves.

Whatever solutions each of us seek may it help us to keep in mind the description of James Joyce, an Irish author, about the Church – “Here comes everyone!” Yes – everyone! Everyone counts – particularly the poor and the “alien.” Mindful that we are Catholics and American, may we consistently embody the words that describe our nation –

*“America! America!
God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood,
From sea to shining sea!”*

Bishop John McCormack
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