

**Remarks at Faith and Immigration Event
St. Peter's Catholic Church in Charlotte, N.C
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It is not hard to make the case that our immigration system is broken. That somewhere around 10 million people currently live in this country without documents is proof enough. The way that immigrants are treated by some of our state and local governments and the ease with which they can be exploited by employers and others is more evidence. The film you just watched puts a human face on the brokenness.

Earlier this summer I attended an immigration summit in Atlanta composed mostly of people from the party that is *not* meeting here in Charlotte this week. Many were business leaders from the Chamber of Commerce, Farm Bureau, and hospitality industry. I learned that it is possible to make the case for immigration reform on economic grounds alone. With a birth rate in the United States of 13.8 per 1000, an all-time low, our economy will soon not have enough people to sell goods and services to. We need immigrants, one of the presenters said, not only to *produce* goods and services, but to consume them. This country has always depended on immigrants for economic health and for the energy and creativity that have made us the economic engine our nation has been for the past couple of centuries.

A recent UCLA study of the economic impact of immigrants suggested that if all undocumented persons currently living in the US were given legal residency today, that action would result in 7 years in a \$1.3 trillion boost to the economy - an enormous economic stimulus without any borrowing.

But I am not here to make an economic case for immigration reform. I am here as a bishop in a church that, like most churches in this country, has taken a strong stand for immigration reform, a stand based, not on the economy, but on welcome.

The church, which counts migrants like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam and the wandering Hebrew people as its spiritual ancestors, and which counts the migrant infant Jesus as its Lord, must speak up for welcome of those who come here, not to do us harm, but only looking for opportunity for themselves and their families.

Our scriptures are clear in their call to "love the immigrant among you." Jesus even reminds us that "the nations" will be judged in part on how they welcome strangers.

This country has stood for welcome in the past. We all know the inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...." It seems a bit quaint nowadays and sadly ironic.

Our immigrant ancestors came overwhelmingly for the opportunity to make a good life for themselves and to care for their families. Immigrants today come for the very same

reason. But Ellis Island has been replaced with a steel fence along our southern border, and “Give me your tired, your poor” has been superseded by laughable low quotas for immigrants, especially those from south of our border. Something is wrong with an immigration system when even a *business-sponsored* Mexican immigrant must wait 14 years for a green card.

At that immigration summit in Atlanta, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami pointed out that, “Immigrants are not a problem. An antiquated immigration system is the problem. . . [In this system] immigrants are not so much lawbreakers as they are broken by the law. . . They are ‘illegal’ because the system does not allow them to be legal.” The line that some want immigrants to stand in is decades long. It is difficult for people of good will to fault those who come here in order to provide for their families for coming without documents when those documents are all but impossible for them to get. Like you and me, these migrants love their families and feel a responsibility to provide for them.

In five years of annual visits to Washington to talk with members of congress and representatives of two administrations, one thing I know for sure: Everyone knows our immigration system is broken. But where is the will to fix it? Congress is afraid of the anti-immigration lobby. The current Washington partisan gridlock means that proposals that might repair the system get caught up in the buzz saw of partisan politics. So we are stuck with a broken system that creates an under-the-radar underclass and breaks apart families.

In the absence of much needed federal immigration reform, in past two years, several states – Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and others - have attempted to deal with our broken immigration system themselves. They have done this by passing repressive immigration laws, laws that are not only not welcoming of immigrants, but are, in many of their provisions, un-necessarily harsh, even hateful. These laws have turned those states into what Jerry Gonzalez of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials called “a hostile environment for Latinos and anyone else who looks foreign.”

I believe that, as people who follow Jesus, Christians are called to resist these repressive laws. They are mean-spirited and do not succeed in making us safer or in addressing our immigration crisis. What they do succeed in is fostering a spirit of hostility, suspicion and ethnic discrimination.

This immigrant nation does not need a hodge-podge of oppressive state immigration laws. The nation needs comprehensive immigration reform.

The year 2013 will be key to the effort to reform our immigration system. Members of Congress and their staffs have told me often that whenever an immigration issue comes up they receive a flood of letters, faxes, e-mails and phone calls from the anti-immigrant side, but they rarely hear from us. So it’s time to speak up. Write. Make some noise. Ask your friends to do the same.

In 2013 more states will consider anti-immigrant legislation like that of Georgia, Alabama and Arizona. In states like Tennessee where churches and citizens and business interests have spoken up proactively, those proposals have not made it into law. In Alabama and Georgia, by contrast, church folk spoke only reactively, after the damage was done. In 2013 those of us who wish to welcome and support the immigrants among us need to speak up and speak up early.

I hope that in 2013 Christians – that all the American people - will remember their immigrant heritage and welcome those who come to join us in this land of blessing and promise.

Notes:

1 The Immigration Summit in Atlanta mentioned in these remarks was called “Forging a New Consensus on Immigrants and America” and was sponsored by the National Immigration Forum.

2 Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services suggests that an immigration overhaul must include the following provisions:

- Provides an earned pathway to lawful permanent residency and eventual citizenship for undocumented immigrants and their families
- Ensures the humane enforcement of U.S. immigration laws, specifically within the immigration detention system, to reduce reliance on the incarceration of vulnerable immigrants and to promote the use of community-based alternatives to detention
- Protects families from separation and ensures an adequate supply of visas for families seeking to reunite in order to reduce the long delays currently experienced by immigrants awaiting family reunification
- Ensures the protection of U.S. citizen and migrant workers
- Provides adequate resources and protections in order to ensure the successful integration of refugees, asylees, unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable migrant populations