

May 1, 2008

***Statement of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Connecticut  
TO SEE THE IMMIGRANT THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH***

The Roman Catholic Bishops of Connecticut, acknowledging the current federal laws and following the failure of Congress to enact immigration reform and the continuing debate within our nation and state, feel compelled to speak from a position of faith and pastoral leadership on this contentious matter. Because migration is such a highly complex global phenomenon, people of good will can reasonably differ on what constitutes the best public policy and law. We approach the issue, however, with a focus on faith, human dignity, and natural law. We try to see immigrants through the eyes of Christ and with the help of faith to understand better what is required of us as Catholics and citizens in addressing the challenges of immigration. We recognize the God-given worth of every person, despite their legal status, and thus the basic human dignity to which they are entitled.

Welcoming the stranger – a characteristic of the Church from the beginning – remains essential to the Church and society today. When Jesus told us to love our neighbor, a lawyer asked him to clarify whom he meant by neighbor. Instead of giving him a legal distinction between who is a neighbor and who is not a neighbor, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25). Jesus teaches that our neighbor is the person who needs us.

Seeing the immigrant through the eyes of faith must begin with the explicit teaching of Christ himself: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35). Jesus identified himself personally with the alien and challenged His followers to see Him in the stranger. Care for the immigrant thus becomes more than a matter of personal kindness, tolerance, or social justice; to welcome a stranger expresses our faith in Jesus Christ.

We call on all Catholics to distance themselves from viewing immigrants to our nation, including undocumented immigrants, in terms and actions that reflect hate, racism and popular misconceptions. Most immigrants to our nation, especially those who are undocumented, flee their homeland because of extreme poverty, violence, persecution, or natural disaster. This movement of people from one place to another has remained a constant feature of human history. From a person's human dignity flow basic human rights, including the right to leave one's country and find a new place to live and work. In Catholic social teaching, these rights are not given by a government; they are inherent in the human person. In the United States, such immigration has shaped and will continue to shape significantly our economic, political, and cultural development. We are all well aware that our own nation is one built by immigrants fleeing poverty and searching for new opportunities.

To uproot oneself from a familiar nation and community is full of risks and dangers. That is why Pope John Paul II called migration a “necessary evil” (*Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, para. 23, 1981). Nor should we minimize the grave problems that accompany illegal immigration: the use of criminal smuggling networks, death in the deserts, human trafficking, exploitative working conditions, the detention of immigrant children, and the separation of families.

The notion that undocumented immigrants are as human beings inferior to legal citizens can have no justification in Christian life. Consideration of human dignity should also prevent a person from being crudely reduced to the anxious status of “illegal alien” or being treated only as an economic object or a unit of labor, with no regard for family unity or the person's social, cultural, and religious needs. Supporting the dignity of the human person must begin at a very local level – in the family, in the parish, and in the community.

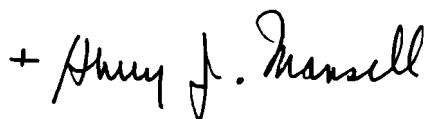
The federal government has the right to make the difficult decisions about who is allowed to enter our country. The President and Congress have a responsibility, in the name of the common good, to enforce security at our nation's borders. Politics may divide the Catholic community on specific policy choices to meet this need, but faith must unite us to the more important values of love, hospitality, keeping families together, and respecting every person's human dignity. Children of immigrants, many of whom are born in this country and have American citizenship, should not find themselves left alone and separated from their parents who are jailed or deported as part of an enforcement action. Citizens can and should press the government to temper its actions with mercy, in order to reduce suffering and humanize public policy toward immigrants.

Nationally, our immigration policies and procedures must be comprehensively reconstructed in a manner that (1) secures our borders from the entry of undocumented migrants, (2) greatly improves the visa process for people seeking legal entry into our country, and (3) creates a path toward the legalization of undocumented workers currently living and working in the United States. Our federal government should also take stronger steps to encourage positive social, economic, and political changes within the nations that are a major source of undocumented immigrants. If the causes of illegal immigration are reduced, so will be the number of undocumented immigrants.

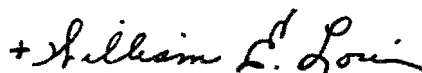
We believe that all legal action, legislatively or in the area of law enforcement, should respect the dignity of the millions of undocumented men, women, and children within our borders. Federal authorities, not state or local law enforcement personnel, should be responsible for the enforcement of immigration laws. State and local law enforcement should be primarily concerned with maintaining order in our cities and towns. Undocumented immigrants within our communities should not be fearful of local and state authorities should a need arise to report a crime, a case of domestic abuse, or other illegal activities. Our state and local governments should act to ensure that a "shadow" community does not continue to grow within our state, due to the fear of immigration enforcement, where a segment of our population remains fearful of cooperation with state and local authorities. Criminal activities would surely flourish in such an environment. State authorities should also halt the exploitation of undocumented immigrants by employers when and wherever it may occur.

A valid concern does exist about the ability of our nation to secure its borders against those who wish us harm. The vast majority of undocumented immigrants, however, seek only a better life for themselves and their families, and pose no threat to our national security. They seek to be law abiding and contributing members of our society. They enrich our society culturally and share many of the same values most Americans hold in high regard: family, faith, the importance of education, and entrepreneurship. Activities that seek to deny undocumented immigrants basic human rights; for example, the arrest of workers seeking employment to sustain themselves, and the denial of housing and fuel assistance based on immigration status, do not reflect the understanding and compassion our Catholic faith calls us to practice.

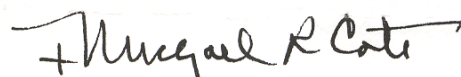
As Bishops of Connecticut, our main task is to help our people follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. There is no place in the Catholic family for racism, hatred of foreigners, exaggerated nationalism, or discrimination against immigrants. In the name of Jesus Christ, we must welcome the stranger at our door. He or she is a reflection of Jesus himself. We close with the words of Saint Paul, who urged the Christians of Rome to "welcome one another then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God." (Rom 15:7).



Most Reverend Henry J. Mansell  
Archbishop of Hartford



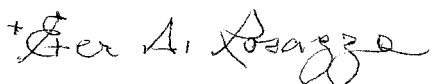
Most Reverend William E. Lori  
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Most Reverend Michael R. Cote  
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