

A nation of immigrants should have an immigration system that works

By Most Rev. Robert E. Guglielmone, Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina

America did not become great by keeping people out. We are great because, throughout our history, we have held our doors wide open to those seeking a new start, economic opportunity, and a chance to raise their families in peace and freedom.

Tragically, our outdated immigration laws no longer uphold this quintessentially American vision. The country founded and built by immigrants now erects unnecessary barriers that turn aspiring Americans away and tear families apart. America desperately needs for Congress to pass immigration reform, to fix this broken system that so clearly fails to meet our needs.

I am the child of immigrants. My parents came here in search of a better life in the early 1900s, when regulations were much simpler and citizenship easier to obtain. Today it is a struggle for many people who want to become Americans. A set of arbitrary quotas established years ago leaves little room for refugees and provides limited opportunity for job seekers, even when U.S. employers very much need their help.

Our failed immigration system also creates a permanent underclass of non-citizens, people who immigrated without proper documentation because they faced unendurable hardship in their native lands. Often forced to decide between either breaking U.S. immigration law or watching their families go hungry, they chose the former, a choice I imagine many of us would make ourselves in the same situation.

Once in America, no matter how hard they work or how lawfully they lead their lives, current immigration policies give them no pathway to legality. They cannot come forward and make amends for this single legal transgression without losing their livelihoods and destroying the way of life their families have come to know.

This is especially hard on children. Even those brought here at an early age, some with no memory of their birthplace or even the ability to speak its language, still face an uncertain future in the only country they know as home.

Legal immigrants are too often treated unfairly by our immigration system as well, forced to wait years for permission to reunite their families. In a nation where the sanctity of human life and supreme importance of the family unit is supposedly one of our most dearly held values, this is unforgivable.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has officially come out in opposition to “enforcement only” immigration policies and in favor of comprehensive immigration reform. It is right and necessary for the United States to amend our immigration policies to create a pathway to legality for undocumented immigrants and their children. We also need smarter policies that use the talents and hard work immigrants have to offer to create more jobs for all workers and make families more prosperous.

The U.S. House of Representatives holds the key. Please join me in making sure our representatives in Congress know that their constituents support immigration reform. Our congressmen need to hear from us before the session ends without the passage of a reform plan. We must not let this opportunity to fix our broken immigration system slip away yet again.

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