

The estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States live in the shadows of anonymity. Let us imagine a composite story that helps illumine their plight. Living in squalid conditions in Mexico, Juan and his wife Maria decided to go to the United States in a desperate effort to make a better life for themselves. In 1994 they paid \$200 to a small group of independent coyotes who smuggled them across the border into Arizona, where, without much water, they barely survived three days in the desert. Eventually, they made their way to the Phoenix area where Juan got a job picking crops and Maria worked as a maid. Living in constant fear of being discovered, they were underpaid and had no access to social services. Nevertheless, they managed to send some money each month to their parents in Mexico. Fortunately, a local Catholic parish welcomed them and provided a Sunday Mass in Spanish that helped nourish their faith and keep their hopes alive. In little over three years, Maria gave birth to two children who were automatically citizens of the United States and were able to attend public school. When their oldest, Santiago, turned 16, he got a driver's license, purchased a cheap car with his parents' help and was able to drive his parents to work and take his sister with him to school. One day in 2012, his father used the car to run some errands. Due to no fault of his own, Juan's car was hit by another vehicle. When the police discovered that he had no driver's license or green card, they arrested him and put him in a local jail for a few days. From there he was sent to a detention center near Tucson, where he was kept for about a month before being bussed to Mexico and dropped off in the middle of the night. Devastated, the family could only hope that one day they will be reunited.

The story highlights the situation of many undocumented immigrants: they came to the United States out of desperation, searching for jobs to improve their financial situation; they paid smugglers to cross the border (today as much as a couple thousand dollars to organized crime coyotes); they send money back to relatives in their native country; they have no legal rights or legal access to social services; their children born here are citizens of the United States; they are always in danger of being discovered and deported (almost 2 million deported during the Obama administration); their families are often separated; and they currently have no legal way to gain citizenship in the United States and emerge from the shadows.

We should note that about 40% of our undocumented immigrants in the United States have a very different story. They arrived here legally on student, business or tourist visas but stayed after their visas ran out. Many are well educated, but they also have trouble finding good jobs, have no legal access to social services, and live in fear of detection and deportation.

For decades, the American bishops have pushed for comprehensive immigration reform. In 2001, they issued a statement, *Welcoming the Strangers Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, that calls Catholics to a conversion of heart, moving us to reach out to the immigrants in our midst, to welcome them, and to be in solidarity with them in their quest for justice. As the Hebrew Scriptures reminded the Israelites to welcome the aliens because they were once aliens in Egypt, so American Catholics should welcome the immigrants since we are all offspring of immigrants who struggled to make it in the United States. Practically, the bishops argue for policies that provide immigrants a path to citizenship, help preserve the integrity of their families, and extend social services to them.

In 2005, the bishops published *Justice for Immigrants*, challenging common misconceptions: undocumented immigrants are not a drain on the economy, but pay billions of dollars in sales, income and property taxes each year; they are not resistant to assimilation since over 90% of second generation immigrants are near-fluent in English; and they do not increase the threat of terrorism since most acts of terrorism in the USA have been perpetrated by individuals who are here legally.

Not all Catholics agree with the approach of their bishops. In May of 2013, *Crisis Magazine* ran an article by Christopher Manion arguing that the bishops should concentrate on opposing abortion and not pontificate on immigration, an issue that is properly addressed by Catholic lay persons. The bishops should persuade Hispanics to disavow the anti-American sentiments common in Latin American countries and should encourage them to assimilate into US culture, following the example of Cardinal James Gibbons, who, around the beginning of the 20th century, urged German Catholic immigrants to assimilate in their new country. Otherwise, Manion argues, we are in danger of losing our "culture and linguistic unity" and becoming a bi-lingual and bi-cultural society.

The Catholic neo-conservative author, George Weigel, argues that the national debate on immigration reform should begin by putting "a high value on the rule of law." The "inalienable value of every human being" is the "bedrock personalist principle" for Catholic thinkers on public policy, but that dignity does not confer an absolute right on anyone to live wherever he or she chooses. The national government "has a right to enforce its citizenship laws and a duty to conduct that enforcement in a just way." Given our history, Catholics should be predisposed to be "pro-immigrant," but we should

live that disposition through the rule of law. The “canons of justice” dictate that immigrants who broke the law “should not be rewarded.” According to Weigel, responsible citizens should demand that “the government fulfill its duty to protect the border,” while common sense realism recognizes that we cannot “send some 10-20 million illegal immigrants home.”

Weigel articulates the view of those who regard a path to citizenship as a form of amnesty that rewards illegal behavior. The illegals should return home and apply for legal citizenship. Our first priority is to secure the borders so we are not facing this intolerable situation in the future.

On June 27, 2013, with Vice President Biden presiding in formal session, the Senate passed an historic comprehensive immigration reform bill by a 68 to 32 margin. The bill, crafted by the Gang of Eight (four Republicans and four Democrats), provides \$4.5 billion for border security so that in five years there will 100% surveillance of the Mexican border and a 90% apprehension rate of those trying to cross. Employers must implement the “E-verify” computer tracking system to ensure that they are not hiring undocumented workers. The bill expands the number of visas that the government can grant annually: doubling the number for high skilled workers to 110,000; more than tripling the number of low skilled laborers to 75,000 by 2019; and granting an unlimited number for foreign spouses, children and parents.

The Senate bill includes a version of the Dream Act that allows a five year path to citizenship for the estimated 2 million young people who were illegally brought into the United States before age 15. Finally, the Immigration Reform Bill offers a 13 year path to citizenship for those who came to the United States before January 1, 2012, with these requirements: pay an initial \$500 fine; pay back loans; learn English; remain employed; pass a criminal background check; apply for a green card after 10 years and for citizenship after three more years.

The American bishops were generally pleased with the Senate bill, though they pushed for more lenient citizenship requirements; for example, a path to citizenship lasting no more than ten years. With the Senate bill passed, the bishops turned their attention to the House of Representatives. In a November 7, 2013, letter to Speaker John Boehner, a Catholic from Ohio, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, representing over 450 of his fellow bishops, respectfully requested that the House address the immigration issue as soon as possible. Arguing on moral grounds, Dolan insisted that “our nation cannot continue to receive the benefits of the work and contributions of undocumented immigrants without extending to them the protection of the law.” He went on: “Keeping these human beings as a permanent underclass of workers” is a “stain on the soul of the nation.”

At the end of January, 2014, the House Republican leadership set forth a broad set of standards or principles to guide a piecemeal approach to immigration reform. Their approach begins with increased border security and stricter interior enforcement that must be achieved before other provisions are implemented. The proposal offers no path to citizenship, since this would weaken the rule of law and would be unfair to immigrants who worked through the system and came here legally. It does include a path to legal permanent residency under many strict conditions: admitting culpability, passing background checks, paying significant fines and back taxes, developing proficiency in English and American civics, and supporting themselves and their families without public assistance. The guidelines also envision the possibility of citizenship for those brought to the country illegally as children.

It seems the stage is now set for an ongoing public debate on immigration reform, especially the contentious issue of citizenship. This provides Christians with an opportunity to reflect on how we frame the issue in determining our own position: we can think of it exclusively as an ethical question of maintaining the rule of law and not rewarding illegal actions; or as a moral question set in the broader context of the example of Jesus and his teachings on love, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. Although such explicit religious considerations are not appropriate in the public debate, they certainly can play an important role in discerning our own position on the complex issue of immigration reform.