IMMIGRATION REFORM: When Were You a Stranger?

The United States is called a melting pot because it blends people from nearly every nation. Almost everyone – or their ancestors – has come from somewhere else. Immigrant minds and muscles helped shape U.S. society and build the nation. The accomplishments of immigrants are a source of pride; the treatment of immigrants often has not been.

The melting pot heated up in late 2012 after President Obama’s impressive haul of votes from Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. This was seen as a sign that the nation is ready to overhaul the U.S. immigration system. The issue has long been divisive, and compromise will not come easily. But with a bi-partisan Senate working group nearing a self-imposed deadline in late March or early April, we look at immigration issues through the lens of faith, using the Pastoral Cycle approach to social analysis.

**Insertion/Involvement:**

*This opening activity is designed to be interactive and adaptable for groups of different ages. The leader can use discretion and allow members to abstain from any questions that make them uncomfortable.*

Stand if your ancestry is 100 percent Native American and all of your ancestors were born on what is now U.S. soil.
- Stand if some of your ancestors came from European nations.
- Stand if some of your ancestors came from African nations.
- Stand if some of your ancestors came from Asian nations.
- Stand if some of your ancestors came from Mexico, Central America or South American nations.
- Stand if some of your ancestors came from areas we haven’t yet mentioned.
- Hover if some of your ancestors came from a different planet.
- Stand if you’re aware that your ancestors here came as refugees from war or violence in their homeland.
- Stand if you’re aware that your ancestors came here because of famine or natural disasters in their homeland.
- Stand if you’re aware that your ancestors came here for economic opportunities or health services that didn’t exist in their homeland.
- Stand if your ancestors came for speedier internet access or because they prefer to watch football that involves 300-pound men wearing helmets.
- Stand up if you’ve eaten today.
- Remain standing if you’ve eaten today – or intend to eat today - meat (such as beef, chicken or pork) or fresh produce (fruits or vegetables).
- Stand if you feel free to assemble with us here today and have no fears that the police will barge through the door to break up our gathering.
- Stand if anyone is forcing you to be here today.
• Stand if you have the right to vote, or, if you are under 18 but are an American citizen and will have that right in an upcoming election. (likely most everyone)
• (If your group is especially large, for this next question just estimate 30 percent and 70 percent of the group and invite a section with about 70 percent to stand) Quickly count off from 1 to 10. Now, if all the 1s through 7s will stand, and all the 8s through 10s please sit. Imagine that you are a politician. Now raise your hand if you’d prefer to win only the votes of those sitting. Raise your hands if you’d prefer to win only the votes of those standing. Before they sit down, let’s have the 8s and 9s stand up. Look around for a moment.

Thank everyone and invite them to be seated.

As you can see, we have much more in common than we might imagine.
• For example, we all have eaten something today. We can thank God for that. We can also thank a farmer or rancher for that. And we can also thank a farmworker, such as a produce picker or a livestock processor, for our food as well.
• Most everyone here has ancestors who came from beyond our shores.
• Most of our ancestors had some compelling reasons to leave their homelands.
• And we have rights. Our right to assemble is guaranteed by the Constitution and the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. That same declaration says you can’t be forced to be part of a group, although your parents, spouse or school board may seem to say otherwise!

Discuss: Which of our rights do we take for granted?
What opportunities or blessings do American citizens have that might be lacking in other nations?

Exploration/Social Analysis
In the previous exercise, you stood a lot. The life of an immigrant involves much time on one’s feet. They often walk, wade and climb many obstacles to arrive in the United States. Once here, they often stand on street corners in hopes of getting day labor jobs, or stand in fields, factories, construction sites and other workplaces, trying to earn a living. So in body and mind, you’ve stood in solidarity with immigrants. It has been said that if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything. There is a lot of rhetoric about immigration reform – some helpful, some not. These statistics provide some signs of the times to begin our discussion:
• More than 11 million undocumented people live in the shadows of America. They come mostly for economic opportunity, but because of their status they are denied many basic rights and live in constant fear of arrest and deportation.
• More than 8 million of these people are in the U.S. workforce.\textsuperscript{ii} That’s more than 1 in every 20 workers.
• They are an integral part of many industries, including agriculture, service, construction, meatpacking and poultry processing. More than half of agricultural laborers are undocumented.\textsuperscript{iii}
• More than 7 out of 10 Hispanic American voters and Asian American voters supported President Obama in 2012.
• Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans favor a comprehensive immigration reform plan to fix our broken system.

It is easy to oversimplify this discussion with numbers, but immigration is an issue that affects all of us in some way. So let’s look deeper to explore what is wrong with our immigration system:

• The U.S. family-based immigration system involves waiting times of five years or more (more than seven years for Mexican permanent residents) for spouses to reunite, or for parents to reunite with their children.
• Since 1993, the United States has spent more than $50 billion on border enforcement. During that time, the number of undocumented people in the nation has more than doubled,\textsuperscript{iv} and nearly 8,000 migrants have perished trying to cross the U.S. desert.
• Between July 2010 and September 2012, 204,810 undocumented parents were removed from the United States, away from their children (who were born here and, thus, are U.S. citizens).\textsuperscript{v}
• Bringing these undocumented immigrants off the economic sidelines would generate a $1.5 trillion boost to the nation’s cumulative GDP over 10 years and add close to $5 billion in additional tax revenue in just the next three years.\textsuperscript{vi}
• Our current immigration only addresses the symptoms, not the causes of why people come to our nation. Extreme poverty, violent conflict, political and religious persecution and environmental destruction push people to leave their homes in search of a better life. U.S. foreign policy must seek smart, effective ways to help reshape financial systems that unduly burden vulnerable populations – including U.S. trade policies, international financial institutions and local economies in sending countries – toward models that support people in need.\textsuperscript{vii}

These economic and ethical pressures spark political momentum to get something done. A bi-partisan group of senators has proposed a plan to create a path to citizenship (contingent upon securing borders), reform the legal immigration system, establish an effective employment verification system, and improve the process for admitting workers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

President Obama, whose plan is similar with the exception of border protection efforts, is eager to work with Congress. Speaking about his goals on Jan. 29, 2013, he reminded Americans that we are an immigrant nation, saying, “A lot of folks forget that most of us used to be them.”

Discuss: What is your vision for immigration reform?
Which factors most strongly influence your views on immigration – economic necessity, ethical fairness, political expediency or other factors?

Theological Reflection

Many perspectives from Scripture and Catholic Social Tradition are offered here. Choose to use as many as your timeframe allows. The discussion questions focus primarily on the scripture passages.

The president’s perspective – we used to be them – echoes an ancient element of our faith. The Israelites were commanded, “In the same way, you too must befriend the foreigner, for you were once foreigners yourselves in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:19).
Jesus felt compassion with migrants and refugees, having fled from Herod with his family and wandered Galilee during his public ministry with no place to call home. He identifies with newcomers and other outcasts, saying “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt. 25:35)

Pope John Paul II said there is a need to balance the rights of nations to control their borders with basic human rights, including the right to work: “Interdependence must be transformed into solidarity based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all.”

Pope Benedict XVI addressed family unity and the needs of sending nations, saying “The fundamental solution is that there would no longer exist the need to emigrate because there would be in one’s own country sufficient work, a sufficient social fabric, such that no one has to emigrate. Besides this, short term measures: It is very important to help the families above all.”

The bishops of Mexico and the United States shared a strong immigration reform message, in their 2003 joint pastoral letter “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope.” They wrote that “more powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.”

In their 2013 National Migration Week statement, the U.S. Bishops remind us “to help newcomers integrate in ways that are respectful, culturally sensitive and responsive to social needs, and of the ongoing need for comprehensive and compassionate immigration reform.”

Archbishop Thomas Wenski wrote recently in The Miami Herald, “A path to citizenship for the undocumented should be the centerpiece of any immigration reform effort this year. A path to citizenship offers immigrants the opportunities and freedom that are the essential components of the American dream. Both the party of Jefferson as well as the party of Lincoln should be able to embrace that.”

“[T]he Catholic Church holds a strong interest in the welfare of immigrants and how our nation welcomes newcomers from all lands,” Archbishop Jose Gomez, chair of the USCCB Committee on Migration, testified on Capitol Hill on Feb. 12, 2013. “The current immigration system, which can lead to family separation, suffering, and even death, is morally unacceptable and must be reformed.”

Discuss: Humans are both social and mobile. They move from school to school, town to town, even nation to nation. It’s not always easy to be the new kid, or to fit in as a newcomer.

- What did it feel like to be an outsider?
- Who welcomed you into the group or culture?
- What skills or values were needed to assimilate into the group? What was the biggest stretch?
- How were you empowered? How did your gifts strengthen the group?
- How have you welcomed other newcomers into the group?

It can be argued that it’s one thing to enter a new kid to school and another thing entirely to welcome an undocumented person who may not speak the dominant language, may lack financial resources and a support network, and may be seen as competing for jobs available to U.S. citizens. But time and again, Scripture and church teachings call us to bear one another’s burden. We also must keep in mind the spiritual, social and economic damage that would come to ourselves, families and society if we continue with the current broken system or turn toward the extreme of mass deportations.
LESSON PLAN

Action
Having done our homework and spiritual calisthenics, now consider the basic elements of immigration reform, sometimes referred to as a three-legged stool:

- A path to citizenship for undocumented people currently in the United States
- Family-based immigration reform that allows families to be reunited more quickly
- Employment-based immigration through a new worker visa program that would allow low-skilled workers to enter the country safely and humanely

Substantial effort also must be given to address the root causes of migration, such as persecution and economic disparity, and to restore due process protections to our immigration enforcement policies.

While legislation is still being drawn up in both houses of Congress, some groups are not waiting around to get the discussion rolling.

The Interfaith Immigration Coalition has been leading an ongoing series of faith call-ins for compassionate immigration reform. IIC provides contact information and suggested talking points for callers at www.interfaithimmigration.org. IIC is a partnership of faith-based organizations committed to enacting fair and humane immigration reform that welcomes the stranger and treats all human beings with dignity and respect. Coalition members advocate for just and equitable immigration policies, educate faith communities, and serve immigrant populations around the country.

Questions
Should these laborers have the right to assemble? Are they causing any public disruption or threat? Should they, as strangers among us, be treated with more dignity?

Discover more about the phenomenon of day labor in the United States. Every day, men and women seek employment in open-air markets by the side of the road, at busy intersections, in front of home improvement stores and in other public spaces. Read “On the Corner: Day Labor in the United States” at http://www.latinounion.org/nationalcornerstudy.pdf

Latino Union of Chicago is one of many advocacy groups trying to improve the lives of newcomers across the nation. It develops grassroots leadership from within the immigrant worker community and addresses the injustices these workers face. LU fights wage theft, advocates for workplace safety and creates business opportunities such as a center that connects skilled laborers with contractors and a cooperative that roasts and sells fair-trade coffee. Latino Union is the recipient of the 2013 Sr. Margaret Cafferty Award, presented by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Find out more at www.latinounion.org

Watch the “Shutting Down a Corner Is Like Shutting Down a Factory” video at www.latinounion.org. It depicts Chicago police herding undocumented day laborers off both and public property as the workers wait to be picked up for jobs.

Education for JUSTICE
www.educationforjustice.org
LESSON PLAN

The Justice for Immigrants Network is coordinating a postcard campaign to promote compassionate immigration reform at http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/index.shtml. JFI is part of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Sending e-mails is increasingly considered to be an effective advocacy technique, as congressional office staff find it easy to tally constituents for or against legislation.

The clock starts ticking once legislation is proposed. That’s the time to weigh in, or check back in, with your congressional representatives. Personal phone calls and letter, with informed opinions and profound stories can carry great weight as well.

To get contact information for your representative and senators, go to www.house.gov or www.senate.gov.

Besides legislative advocacy, there are other ways to support immigration reform. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development has committed more than $3,500,000 in the past year to support to grassroots organizations that promote immigration reform. Find out more about how to help CCHD at http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/

And while meeting with leaders of many faith traditions from across the nation on March 8, 2013, President Obama asked that they pray that Congress will pass comprehensive immigration reform this year. Pray the prayer below or find more prayers in the Archdiocese of Chicago’s immigration prayer resource at http://www.archchicago.org/immigration/pdf/Immigration/PrayersIntentionsSampler_en.pdf.

We Pray for Just Immigration Reform

For immigration policies that respect the rights and dignity of all migrants and their families. . .
God who is just, hear us.

For policies that acknowledge the right of persons to fulfill their basic needs abroad when they cannot be fulfilled at home. . .
God who is just, hear us.

For policies that welcome refugees and asylum seekers who flee danger in their countries. . .
God who is just, hear us.

For immigration reform that respects national sovereignty and security, but not at the expense of the common good. . .
God who is just, hear us.

For reform that seeks to address the causes of the poverty in developing countries from which many migrants flee. . .
God who is just, hear us.

Just God, guide our leaders as they consider immigration reform proposals. Help us to raise our voices for the vulnerable, that just solutions may be found. Amen.
Endnotes


viii Pope John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rel Socialis (On Social Concerns), No. 39

ix Interview with Pope Benedict XVI, April 15, 2008.


