

# Justice for Immigrants

## Q & A

*Questions asked by Participants from St. Alexander's Educational Forum  
Answers provided by Sister Josephe Marie Flynn, SSND  
& Rob Shelledy, Director of Catholic Social Action*

1. **Why is this issue important to my soul?**  
*(Answer from S. Josephe Marie)*

The issue of “justice for immigrants” is important to the soul because we are called and sent to imitate Jesus and so to continue his mission. As Fr. Javier Bustos said at St. Alexander’s forum, “The Church does not have a mission; the MISSION OF JESUS has a Church!” The mission of Jesus is clearly stated in Luke’s Gospel: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free....”

Jesus reveals who God is and what God values. St. Matthew’s Gospel uses the Greek word “splanchnizomai” – “moved with compassion” to show us how Jesus reveals God in how he lives and in what he teaches.

Jesus lives the pattern:

**(1) SEE.**

**(2) BE MOVED WITH COMPASSION.**

**(3) ACT!**

- 1) Mt. 9:36-10:1 – “At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them (splanchnizomai), because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.”
- 2) Mt. 14:13-14 – “When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them (splanchnizomai), and he cured their sick.” (This was followed by the feeding of the 5,000.)
- 3) Mt. 15: 29-32-ff: “Jesus summoned his disciples and said, ‘My heart is moved with pity for the crowd (splanchnizomai), for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.’”

Jesus teaches the pattern: **(1) SEE, (2) BE MOVED WITH COMPASSION, (3) ACT!**

- 4) Mt. 18:21-27-35 (Parable of a king who decided to settle all debts) “Moved with compassion (splanchnizomai), the master of that servant let him go and forgave him...”
- 5) Mt. 25:31-46 (Last Judgment) “Lord, when did we SEE you a stranger and welcome you?” “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

This is the pattern of true discipleship, revealing who God is as we carry out the mission of Jesus to the poor: **(1) SEE, (2) BE MOVED WITH COMPASSION, (3) ACT!**

2. With the threat of terrorism always looming, why would it be wrong to protect our borders by building walls OR FENCES along them?

**It's the government's responsibility to protect its citizens. It would stop people from entering the country illegally but it could also save lives. I don't know the statistics, but how many people die trying to cross the Southwestern deserts of Arizona & New Mexico trying to enter the country illegally?**

*(Answer from S. Josephe Marie)*

While the United States bishops teach that every nation has a right to secure its borders, they believe, as do many others who have studied the question of border enforcement, that no border enforcement strategy will be effective in keeping determined people out unless it is combined with policy changes addressing the push/pull factors that compel immigrants to come here.

The pull factors are: (1) Family reunification – Because of strict visa quotas set in 1952, far too few visas are available for close relatives of American citizens and permanent residents. The current wait for Mexican families is fourteen years. (2) Jobs: Many U.S. industries rely on immigrant workers, yet our nation does not provide anywhere near enough visas to meet this demand.

The push factors are: (1) Threat of persecution, especially for those fleeing war-ravaged parts of Latin America, and (2) Economic desperation: The push factor got stronger when NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) opened the border in 1994 for goods and services, but made it much harder for laborers to come. According to one source, over one million farms in southern Mexico closed because they could not compete with the inflow of American produce.

From 1993-2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled. Yet the number of unauthorized arrivals increased tenfold (mostly due to NAFTA). Tougher 1996 U.S. border strategies channeled migrants toward remote crossing points, resulting in increased fatalities, a growth in smugglers and traffickers, and reduced chances of apprehension.

Between Oct. 1, 2005, and Sept. 15, 2006, 426 people died while illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. Most deaths occurred in Arizona, the busiest illegal entry point and the deadliest because of the punishing desert that migrants must cross.

3. The United States is officially an English speaking country. Why would it be wrong to have an English-only amendment?

*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

The United States does not have an official language, although 28 of the 50 states have laws making English their official language. 82% of people living in America only speak English. 11% of people speak Spanish at home. Of those who speak Spanish at home, only one quarter of them are not fluent in English.

Today, within ten years of arrival, more than 75% of immigrants speak English well; moreover, demand for English classes at the adult level far exceeds supply. This has not always been the case. For example, in 1848 Wisconsin published its new constitution in English, Norwegian, and German. In addition, Archbishop Henni, the first bishop of the (then) Diocese of Milwaukee, established the first German-language newspaper in Milwaukee. Immigrants to the United States have always reluctantly given up their mother tongue, but they eventually do.

4. **Why are so many illegal immigrants in our country? Are they not able to find jobs and adequate income in Mexico or other Central American nations?**

*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

Studies have shown that the volume of illegal immigrants is directly related to economic conditions in Mexico. 40% of the Mexican population lives below the Mexican poverty line (compared with 12% of people in the U.S. that live below our poverty line.) The number in Guatemala is 75%.

Mexico has long had more people of working age than jobs. “Time” magazine recently wrote:

*“Mexico's predicament is that its economy needs to generate a million jobs a year for roughly the next two decades – in order to handle its demographic bulge – but lately has been producing about half that.”*

The economic pressures associated with low wages and unemployment in Mexico together with its geographic proximity make such immigration almost inevitable. About 1/8 of the Mexican working population of working age is employed in the U.S. and the U.S. agriculture industry is increasingly dependent on undocumented workers.

5. **What are the U.S. Catholic Bishops advocating in response to proposed immigration reform in both the House of Representatives and the Senate?**

*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

As the Congress was unable to pass any immigration reform legislation this session, the Members must introduce new legislation for the 2007-2008 session. Again, the bishops will be supporting legislation that reflects these five principles:

- I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
- II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- V. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

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6. One complaint is that illegal immigrants have cost enormous money by their use of social services intended for U.S. citizens (schools, health care, etc.). Do illegal immigrants have a substantial negative impact on the quality of life of average income Americans (e.g., higher taxes)? Do illegal immigrants have any positive impact on our economy (e.g., purchasing goods and services such as groceries, payroll taxes, etc.)  
*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

Immigrant labor force participation is consistently higher than native-born, and immigrant workers make up a larger share of the U.S. labor force (12.4%) than they do the U.S. population (11.5%). Immigrants pay taxes in the form of income, property, sales, and taxes at the federal and state level. Somewhere between 55-65% of illegal immigrants in the work force are in jobs that are considered “on the books” which collect FICA and income tax withholding. So it is not surprising that a range of studies find that immigrants pay between \$90 and \$140 billion a year in federal, state, and local taxes.

As for social services, undocumented immigrants are ineligible for Social Security under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which also granted states the authority to limit public assistance to U.S. citizens alone. At the same time, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (better known as the Welfare Reform Act) barred legal immigrants from receiving food stamps or Supplemental Security Income and prohibited them from receiving AFDC for at least five years after admission to the United States.

[http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policy\\_reports\\_2005\\_fivemyths.shtml](http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policy_reports_2005_fivemyths.shtml)

Even though illegal immigrants do not have much effect on welfare services, they do have effects in education and health care. Many illegal immigrants have their families with them and about 2/3rds of these children are native-born U.S. citizens under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Most states require all children to attend school, and schools are expensive. Just as parents with children in a Catholic school pay property taxes which pay for other families’ children’s education, taxpayers without children in school are paying for all the children in school.

Similarly in healthcare, the children of illegal immigrants have an economic impact. As many of them are U.S. citizens, the children are eligible for Medicaid and SCHIP (State Children’s Health Insurance Program). In addition, as most illegal immigrants work in jobs that do not provide health insurance, they tend to use public hospitals. In this manner, they are quite similar to low-income U.S. citizens.

Overall, it must be kept in mind that illegal immigrants make up only 3% of the overall population and 5% of the work force. They are a small part of a much larger trend of increased diversity in American society. In 1970, foreign-born people (legal resident and non-legal) made up 5% of the U.S. population, which was the lowest percentage in the 160 years for which data is available. In 2005, foreign-borns made up 12% of our population.

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7. Do the Bishops consider the securing of U.S. borders to be a legitimate concern to stem the tide of future illegal immigration and even to protect against persons (e.g., terrorists) who may have more sinister intentions?

*(Answer from S. Josephe Marie)*

First, stemming the tide of illegal migration requires less economic disparity between neighboring countries. While Mexico is not poor, corrupt officials and policies keep vast numbers of impoverished people desperate to improve their lot. For this reason, the Bishops strongly urge America and other economically vibrant nations to help eradicate poverty in poorer nations. (See <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/>, the Catholic Campaign against Global Poverty.)

Second, our Bishops say that comprehensive immigration reform and updated quotas are needed to replace America's push/pull policies. (See answer to question #2 above.) Real reform can go a long way toward regulating and controlling the flow of immigrants.

Third, current border enforcement policies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of migrants. Enforcement strategies should be:

- **Targeted** – Focused to ensure that those who are dangerous are more easily identified and apprehended, requiring improvements in intelligence and information sharing, and technical improvements. Ethnic and racial profiling must be avoided.
- **Proportional** – Unnecessary penalties and force are to be avoided. Border patrol agents should receive intensive training on appropriate tactics. Policies should not drive migrants into remote desert regions. State and local law enforcement should not be authorized to enforce immigration laws.
- **Humane** – The human dignity and rights of each migrant is to be respected to the greatest extent possible. Families should not be divided. Undocumented people should not be detained for lengthy periods nor intermingled with violent offenders. Children should be accommodated within a child welfare context. Asylum seekers should be screened by a qualified adjudicator.

Fourth, no terrorists have been caught coming over the 1,851-mile U.S.-Mexican border. Since 1995, there have been fifteen terrorists caught who crossed the 5,525-mile U.S.-Canadian border. However, not one security expert since 9/11 has said that restrictive immigration measures would have prevented the terrorist attacks – instead, all agree that the key to preventing a terrorist attack is the effective use of good intelligence.

The Bishops believe that if offered a legal path to permanent residency, undocumented immigrant residents will come forward to present themselves to authorities. For security purposes, it would be much better for us to know who is in our country and to give them an opportunity to come out of the shadows.

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8. What is the current status (in both the House and Senate) of the two immigration reform bills that were, to say the least, very different in policy and spirit?

*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

As Congress was unable to pass any immigration reform legislation this session, the Members must introduce new legislation for the 2007-2008 session.

9. These people are here illegally. Usually, breaking the law is a bad thing. Why is their situation such that, we should be compassionate and extend amnesty? In other words, there are occasional exceptions to the law. Are they more like free-loaders or are they here out of financial or economic desperation?

*(Answer from S. Josephe Marie)*

As Catholic Christians, we respect every person as a child of God with inalienable human rights, irregardless of immigration status. Furthermore, our mission is to see the truth of another's situation, be moved with the compassion of God, and act as Jesus would. The purpose of civil laws, including those that regulate immigration, is to keep order in society. If a law does not respect basic human rights, then the law is unjust and needs to be changed. (This is why earlier this year, Cardinal Mahoney announced that if proposed legislation was passed, criminalizing undocumented immigrants and those feeding, clothing, and otherwise attending to their basic needs, then he would tell all his priests to disobey the law.)

Remember, people do not usually choose to leave their own country unless they are desperate – to escape persecution, to reunite their family, or to provide for their family.

Would-be “freeloaders” are out of luck since U.S. law prevents undocumented immigrants from receiving public benefits except for those needed to safeguard American society – emergency medical care and public education for children. (See answer to # 6.) This is why Catholics and other compassionate people are eager to provide food, shelter and other basic help to immigrants.

By coming without proper documents or overstaying legal temporary visas, undocumented immigrants break a civil law, not a criminal law. Civil laws cover misdeeds like speeding, parking violations, hunting without a license, etc. The usual punishment for disobeying a civil law is a fine. The “path to citizenship” advocated by the Bishops has strict mandates, including a \$1,000 fine for violating the civil law.

10. What are names of organizations keeping track of the immigration issues and how can we contact them?

*(Answer from Rob Shelledy)*

There are many different organizations in this area. The Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC) is a good one and is available on the web at <http://www.cliniclegal.org/>.

11. Who is involved in exploring the dilemma outside of news media . . . i.e. Catholic magazines . . . to help keep us informed?  
(Answer from Rob Shelledy)

The best source of information is the Justice for Immigrants web site at [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org). Any number of Catholic magazines provides coverage on these issues from the *Catholic Herald*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, and *America*, just to name a few.