



# ADVOCACY

# Bishops Press for Immigration Reform

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By ANTONIO B. CUBE, JR.

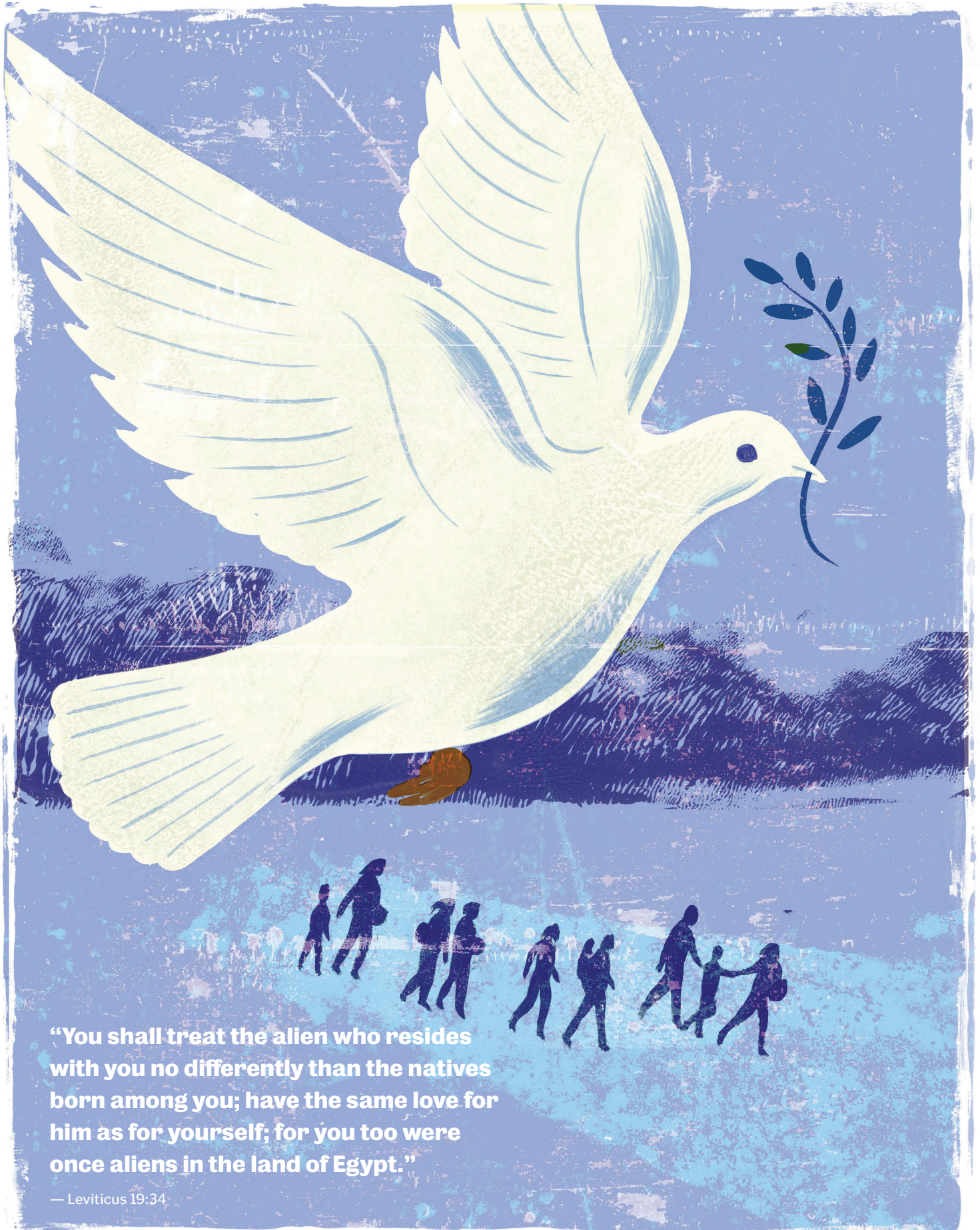
In early 2000, U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops on their respective immigration committees began meeting informally to discuss mutual concerns regarding migration between the two countries. Troubled by migrant deaths in the border region deserts, as well as by the family separations created by flawed immigration policies and practices in both countries, the two national bishops' conferences produced a joint pastoral statement speaking out against these injustices. Released in 2003, the U.S. and Mexican bishops' pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, called for a "globalization of solidarity" and an overhaul of the U.S. immigration system.<sup>1</sup> It also outlined several criteria for the reform of the U.S. immigration system, including:

- Broad-based legalization for undocumented immigrants
- Reform of the family-based immigration system to allow family members to reunite with loved ones in the United States
- Reform of the employment-based immigration system to provide legal pathways for migrants to come to the U.S. and work in a safe, humane and orderly manner
- Abandonment of the border "blockade" enforcement strategy
- Restoration of due process protections for immigrants

*Strangers No Longer* gave the bishops an opportunity to develop a vision rooted in the Catholic moral tradition, a vision that, they argue, should be used as a framework to guide the formation of immigration policy. Equally important, *Strangers No Longer* is built upon Catholic social teaching and Gospel and biblical texts in order to frame

and articulate the church's position on migrants and immigration. It was written to help Catholics and others understand why it is important — and within the Catholic tradition — to welcome immigrants and work to seek justice for new arrivals to our nation.

In June 2004, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC) board of directors resolved to make comprehensive immigration reform, with special emphasis on legalization, a major public policy priority within the Catholic Church. Soon thereafter, many other national Catholic institutions also made legalization a policy priority and, as part of the U.S. Catholic Church's response, a diverse group of Catholic organizations with national networks — including the Catholic Health Association — joined the Justice for Immigrants campaign.<sup>2</sup> Led by the bishops, the campaign was designed to unite and mobilize a vast network of Catho-



**“You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.”**

— Leviticus 19:34



lic institutions, individuals and other persons of good faith in support of a broad legalization program and comprehensive immigration reform. The Justice for Immigrants campaign's overarching goal is to maximize the church's influence on the issue, consistent with the immigration reform principles outlined in *Strangers No Longer*.

Since its inception, the Justice for Immigrants campaign has sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To educate the public, especially the Catholic community and including Catholic public officials, about church teaching on migration and immigrants
- To create political will for positive immigration reform
- To enact legislative and administrative reforms based on the principles articulated by the bishops
- To organize Catholic networks to assist qualified immigrants in obtaining the benefits of the reforms

In the 10 years since the release of *Strangers No Longer*, millions of human beings throughout the world have migrated in order to support their families or to escape persecution. They are subject to physical and emotional harm by smugglers, human traffickers, organized crime gangs and even corrupt law enforcement personnel. After experiencing these ordeals, many of the migrants finally arrive at their destination and subsequently are exploited or cheated by dishonest employers and further victimized in other ways.

Many undocumented immigrants in our country have suffered these same injustices. Other groups of immigrants fleeing war, violence (or the threat of violence), religious persecution, natural disasters, famine and the like face obstacles as they attempt to settle themselves and their families in the safety of the United States.

Our nation's complex immigration system makes it more difficult for these refugees to come to the United States to live and work. Unfortunately, barriers preventing undocumented immigrants from gaining legal status in the U.S. also often are extremely problematic for refugees trying to come to or remain in the United States. The bishops and local Catholic parishes and their associated charities have assisted thousands

of refugees to resettle here, but, as explained in *Strangers No Longer*, the resettlement process should not be so grueling for these, some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world.

In the last few years, U.S. Catholic bishops, archbishops and cardinals throughout the country have spoken and written publicly in support of undocumented immigrants and for immigration reform. Where state Catholic conferences exist, groups of bishops have unanimously penned their own statements<sup>3</sup> and pastorals<sup>4</sup> in support of immigration reform.

Individual bishops have done likewise, such as Bishop Anthony Taylor who wrote "*I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me: A Pastoral Letter on the Human Rights of Immigrants*"<sup>5</sup> as his first pastoral letter after being appointed bishop of Little Rock, Ark. A number of Catholic bishops also have had videos produced expressing their support for immigration reform,<sup>6</sup> written articles and op-eds in national Catholic<sup>7</sup> and non-Catholic newspapers<sup>8</sup> and expressed their views on national<sup>9</sup> and local<sup>10</sup> television interviews.

Even with the effort already directed in support of immigrants and reform, the U.S. bishops are "doubling down" in their attempts to advance

**"To proactively prohibit a human being from accessing health care is mean-spirited and contrary to the general public health."**

— USCCB letter to Congress (Jan. 26, 2010)<sup>11</sup>

immigration reform and educate Catholics about church teaching on the issue. Indeed, in addition to sample homilies to help priests and deacons convey an immigration message from the pulpit,<sup>12</sup> the USCCB has commissioned national polls of Catholics in order to determine their sentiments on the issue of immigration. The most recent survey, from April 2013, found nearly 80 percent of Catholic voters support earned citizenship.<sup>13</sup> An earlier poll determined that "3 out of 4 Catholics agree that the Church has a moral obligation to help provide for the humanitarian needs of immigrants, regardless of their legal status."<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, individual bishops have publicly criticized anti-immigrant comments made by elected officials, such as Iowa Republican Congressman Steve King's July 2013 statement that

“for every [young illegal immigrant] who’s a valedictorian, there’s another 100 ... [with] ... calves the size of cantaloupes because they’re hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert.”<sup>15</sup> On the positive side of the coin, sole bishops and Catholic conferences have praised “immigrant-friendly” measures that have been passed into law.

In addition, bishops throughout the United States have tied immigration and their pastoral obligations to migrants to the issue of religious freedom, perhaps most notably by Archbishop Thomas Rodi of Mobile, Ala., who wrote publicly in response to the passage of an anti-immigrant state law that, “we, as people of faith, have no choice but to defend the right to the free exercise of religion granted to us as citizens of Alabama.” The Archbishop further stated that, “This new law prevents us as believers from exercising our life of faith as commanded by the Lord Jesus.”<sup>16</sup>

In terms of linking immigrants to the delivery of health care services, in 2009 the chairmen of three USCCB committees — Rockville Centre, N.Y.’s Bishop William Murphy of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Salt Lake City’s Bishop John Wester of the Committee on Migration, and Philadelphia’s Cardinal

**“We judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. The treatment of migrants challenges the consciences of elected officials, policy makers, enforcement officers, residents of border communities, and providers of legal aid and social services, many of whom share our Catholic faith.”**

— *Strangers No Longer*

Justin Rigali of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities — signed a letter to each U.S. senator stating that “immigrants pay the same taxes as citizens, and their health needs cannot be ignored. Leaving them outside a reformed system is both unfair and unwise. Health care is not just another issue for the Church or for a healthy society. It is a fundamental issue of human life and dignity. Health care is a critical component of the Catho-

lic Church’s ministry.”<sup>17</sup>

Just as important, Catholic bishops have not shied away from providing testimony in state legislatures, Congress, and the U.S. Senate in support of reform, opposition to anti-immigrant measures and legislation, as well as articulating the church’s principles regarding immigration reform as outlined above. Testimony provided by various bishops have been recorded on C-SPAN.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that statements by bishops have been in red, blue and purple states and congressional districts and, thus, Catholic bishops, individually and collectively, have demonstrated that their support for immigrants is not driven by partisanship.

Despite the multitude of efforts, statements, videos and media interviews, the bishops and their allies have been unsuccessful in passing comprehensive immigration reform legislation or any of its components that could benefit a portion of the undocumented population. In 2007, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (commonly known as the McCain-Kennedy bill) failed to pass out of the Senate.<sup>19</sup> In a glimmer of hope, in 2010 the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act<sup>20</sup> did pass out of the House of Representatives, but ultimately died in the Senate.

In the weeks and days leading up to the final votes for both the McCain-Kennedy bill in 2007 and the DREAM Act in 2010, the USCCB and individual bishops expressed their private and public sentiments regarding the legislation. The USCCB and individual bishops also released statements and pronouncements of disappointment, respectively, after the final votes in 2007 and 2010.

Regardless of past results, the U.S. bishops are determined to obtain justice for immigrants, and that determination has been carried out by the Catholic faithful. That was evident in May 2013, in the hours before the Senate Judiciary Committee was to vote to advance immigration reform legislation to the Senate floor, when 200 diocesan Justice for Immigrants staff and other Catholic advocates converged on Washington, D.C., and met with committee members or their staff urging that they support the measure. The effort succeeded with the Judiciary Committee members and, ultimately, the Sen-



ate passing S.744, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, one month later.<sup>21</sup>

This year the Justice for Immigrants campaign has been directed to keep up the Catholic effort to educate others, grow support within parishes and continue to lead the advocacy charge for immigration reform. These activities, in fact, carry on with increased backing for immigration from the bishops. Indeed, in mid-2013, the Justice for Immigrants campaign received permission to organize pilgrimages for immigration reform and other events in parishes throughout the country or, as reported by the *New York Times*, the “Catholic Push to Overhaul Immigration Goes to Pews.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, a separate organizational department within the Catholic bishops’ conference provided a generous grant to the Justice for Immigrants campaign in 2013 in order to “strengthen the capacity of our institutions to help immigrant families come out from the shadows and participate more actively in American society.”<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with the release of *Strangers No Longer*, the U.S. Catholic bishops’ support for immigrants and immigration reform has been clearly stated and unwavering. Catholics, immigrants and supporters of immigrants can expect to see the church’s leadership continue to press this issue with lawmakers, in the pews and through prayer.

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#### NOTES

1. U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, Jan. 22, 2003), [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm).
2. Officially titled the “Justice for Immigrants: We are One Family under God” campaign.
3. See <http://bit.ly/1k18GtK>.
4. See [www.archatl.com/archbishops/declarations/2011-immigration-eng.html](http://www.archatl.com/archbishops/declarations/2011-immigration-eng.html).
5. See [www.arkansas-catholic.org/news/article/1484](http://www.arkansas-catholic.org/news/article/1484).
6. See <http://bit.ly/1d45U6A>.
7. See [www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/wester-interview.pdf](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/wester-interview.pdf).
8. See <http://bit.ly/1bSWptl>.
9. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF6Oso1Y3I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF6Oso1Y3I).
10. See [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=a2cUY7n0HYE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=a2cUY7n0HYE).
11. USCCB letter to Congress (Jan. 26, 2010) <http://bit.ly/19Azi3H>.
12. See [www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/SuggestionsforHomilists.pdf](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/SuggestionsforHomilists.pdf).
13. See [www.usccb.org/news/2013/13-073.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/news/2013/13-073.cfm).
14. See [www.zenit.org/en/articles/poll-catholics-want-immigration-reform](http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/poll-catholics-want-immigration-reform).
15. See <http://bit.ly/1hQw5SY>.
16. See <http://bit.ly/1h9L1yO>.
17. See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/upload/health-care-letter-senate-2009-09-30.pdf>.
18. See [www.unz.org/Pub/CSPANTV-2010-02583](http://www.unz.org/Pub/CSPANTV-2010-02583).
19. See <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d110:SN01348:@@S>.
20. The DREAM Act would provide conditional permanent residency to certain immigrants who graduate from U.S. high schools, arrived in the U.S. as minors, and lived in the country continuously for a specified number of years prior to the bill’s enactment. If they were to complete two years in the military or two years at a college or university, they would obtain temporary residency for a six-year period. Within the six-year period, they may qualify for permanent residency if they have acquired a degree from an institution of higher education in the U.S. or completed at least 2 years in a program for a bachelor’s degree or higher degree in the U.S. or have “served in the armed services for at least 2 years and, if discharged, have received an honorable discharge.”
21. See [www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/COM-Statement-on-Senate-CIR-Vote.pdf](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/documents/COM-Statement-on-Senate-CIR-Vote.pdf).
22. See <http://nyti.ms/19xvd5G>.
23. See [www.usccb.org/news/2013/13-044.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/news/2013/13-044.cfm).

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