

Immigration debate energizes faithful

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—The debate over immigration reform currently dividing America at large and congressional Republicans in particular is—ironically—uniting a wide array of the religious community that views immigration reform as a moral issue.

The Roman Catholic Church, mainline Protestants and Hispanic evangelicals have been at the forefront of a movement to deal with the nation's problem with illegal immigration in a way that attempts to balance enforcement of the law with compassion for migrant workers. The union of the groups comes despite some voices in conservative circles arguing for a policy focused on harsher enforcement of existing immigration laws.

“We’ve got an immigration system (that) impacts on basic human dignity and human life. The status quo is morally unacceptable, because we witness abuse in the workplace, by smugglers and people dying in the desert,” said Kevin Appleby, an immigration-policy specialist for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“We feel there’s an obligation to speak out and say, ‘Look, the system is

broken—it doesn't acknowledge the reality of migration today, and we need to change it.'"

On March 30, the Senate took up debate on the Border Control Act, a bill sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.). It is similar to a bill, already approved in the House, that would focus on enforcement in preventing undocumented workers from making their way into the United States—mainly along the U.S./Mexico border.

In the week leading up to the Senate action, hundreds of thousands of immigrants, Hispanics and allies protested the House bill, including strikes by high school students from California to Virginia and a march that drew a reported half-million people to downtown Los Angeles. The protests also included a group of mainline and evangelical Protestant ministers, Catholic priests and Jewish rabbis who marched, in their clerical garb, on Senate offices March 27.

The demonstrators and other critics of the House bill have described its proposed measures for cracking down on illegal immigration as "draconian," including provisions that would build a wall along the Mexican border and criminalize providing humanitarian aid to those immigrating illegally.

For instance, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, an umbrella group for Hispanic-American evangelicals, has said the House legislation "would in essence deport the 11.5 million undocumented immigrants (estimated to be in the United States) and create punitive consequences for faith-based organizations that assist any undocumented individual."

Partially in response, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted March 27 to approve a separate immigration-reform bill that explicitly exempts religious groups from prosecution for providing humanitarian aid to undocumented

immigrants and sets up programs that would register immigrant workers, get them to pay taxes and penalties, and place them on the path to permanent status or full citizenship.

Four Republicans—who spanned the spectrum from Pennsylvania moderate Sen. Arlen Specter to very conservative Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback—joined the committee’s minority Democrats in approving the alternative bill. Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), one of the alternative bill’s main supporters, credited “the faith community” with forcing it to the Senate floor.

The reform the Kennedy bill represents is needed badly, said Alejandro Camacho, a Texas Baptist pastor who regularly works with Hispanic immigrants.

“It is just ridiculous how the laws have separated our families and our congregations,” said Camacho, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Cristiana in McKinney, and director of a nonprofit organization called Immigration Services.

Camacho handles immigration-law cases for undocumented immigrants in Texas—almost all of them Mexican natives. He noted the vast difference in wages between the two neighboring countries—blue-collar workers can easily make 10 or even 20 times their previous salary by simply crossing the border—drives many heads of Mexican households to cross the Rio Grande in search of work.

But they often leave all or part of their families behind, sending any extra money they earn back to Mexico. The difficulty often comes, Camacho said, when such workers feel they need to return home.

“I have a lot of people, a lot of families who are in (federal deportation) proceedings because they messed up—because they went to go see their father who is dying,” he said.

When such workers—who often are poorly educated and unaware of the vast array of U.S. laws governing immigration— attempt to return to their jobs in the United States and get caught, current law bars them from re-entering the country for a several-year waiting period.

Worse, Camacho said, “If they come back illegally, they will be barred forever.”

He also noted that stepped-up enforcement of immigration laws in the days since 9/11—designed to thwart terrorists attempting to cross U.S. borders—have snared many immigrants for reasons entirely unrelated to terrorism.

“This is nonsense, really,” he continued. “Immigration (law) as it is, it destroys, it destroys; it’s very inhuman.”

Supporters of the harsher House bill have criticized the Senate alternative as weak on law enforcement. They also say it opens the door to further economic hardship for blue-collar American workers, who must compete with an onslaught of immigrants willing to work for lower wages.

“The bill essentially provides for a sweeping amnesty program for the 11 million-plus illegal aliens already in the United States,” said a statement from the American Conservative Union. The group said the bill risks border security because it “undermines respect for the rule of law and encourages more illegals to storm our borders.”

Carol Swain, a law professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, has written that a similar guest-worker program proposed by President Bush is “another amnesty program that places the interests of illegal immigrants ahead of those of low-skill, low-wage Americans— primarily poor whites, blacks and immigrants from disfavored countries— who compete with the illegal population for jobs in the service sector.”

But the Catholic Church's Appleby said that the U.S. economy would be seriously impaired if all illegal immigrants were deported tomorrow, because there are simply not enough other workers to replace them—and there will be even fewer in the future.

“We benefit from the presence of these immigrants overall, economically,” he said.

Economists have noted that there are very few goods and services currently sold in the United States that do not depend on illegal-immigrant labor somewhere in their supply chain. The fact that Mexican immigrants are willing to work for less compensation, and in more dangerous conditions, than the vast majority of American workers keeps prices down on a vast array of goods.

However, Appleby added, even if the United States benefits economically from immigration, giving illegal immigrants paths to legal status is just a beginning for truly moral immigration reform.

“By the same token, (immigrant-)sending countries like Mexico are benefiting from the status quo. ... They, in our opinion, should be doing to create more jobs in sending communities so these people can provide for their families where they are,” he said. “A person should have a right not to migrate, a right to stay where they are. And that is the goal over time—that migration is driven by choice and not by necessity.”

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