



## **Guest Column by Archbishop Jose Gomez: Where do we go from Here? Why We Cannot Wait for Immigration Reform**

March 9, 2017

*On March 8, speaking to a Napa Institute conference in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez delivered one of the most compelling and sensible talks in recent memory on our current immigration dilemmas. I strongly encourage priests and people across the Greater Philadelphia region to read, share, reflect on and make their own the convictions Archbishop Gomez expresses in these thoughts. I turn over my column space this week to help further that goal.*

*+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.  
Archbishop of Philadelphia*

My friends,

Thank you for your warm welcome. It is great to be with you. I was honored to be invited to talk to you about this issue today.

Immigration is close to my heart and immigrants have always been at the heart of my ministry — for nearly 40 years as a priest and now as a bishop.

Immigration is also deeply personal for me. I was born in Monterrey, Mexico and I came to this country as an immigrant. I have relatives who have been living in what is now Texas since 1805, when it was still under Spanish rule. So my immigrant roots run deep. I have been a naturalized American citizen for more than 20 years now.

I love this country and I believe in America's providential place in history. I am inspired by this nation's historic commitment to sharing the fruits of our liberty and prosperity and opening our arms to welcome the stranger and the refugee.

And I know that I am not alone in feeling — I feel like our great country has lost its way on this issue of immigration. In my opinion, immigration is the human rights test of our generation.

It goes without saying that you invited a pastor here today — not a politician. I have great respect for the vocation of politics. It is a noble calling, a vocation to serve justice and the common good.

A pastor takes a different kind of approach to political “realities.”

For me, immigration is about people not politics. For me, behind every number is a human soul with his or her own story. A soul who is created by God and loved by God. A soul who has a dignity and a purpose in God’s creation. Every immigrant is a child of God — a somebody, not a *something*.

In the Church, we say, *¡Somos familia!* Immigrants are our family. We say, “*En las buenas y en las malas.*” In the good times and in the bad. We always stay together.

We can never abandon our family. That is why the Church has always been at the center of our debates about immigration. And we always will be. We cannot leave our family alone, without a voice.

Practically speaking there is no single institution in American life that has more day-to-day experience with immigrants than the Catholic Church — through our charities, ministries, schools and parishes.

And there is simple reason for that. *Immigrants are the Church.*

The Catholic Church in this country has always been an immigrant Church. Just as America has always been a nation of immigrants — a nation that thrives on the energy, creativity and faith of peoples from every corner of the world.

In Los Angeles, where I come from today, we have about 5 million Catholics — they are drawn from every part of the world, every race and nationality and ethnic background. We carry out our ministries every day in more than 40 different languages. It is amazing.

I should also add that among my people in Los Angeles — we have about 1 million who are living in this country without authorization or documentation.

So these issues of immigration take on a certain daily urgency for me. A few years ago, I wrote a little book in which I tried to think about some of these questions. The book is called, “Immigration and the Next America.”

And I want to do that today. I want to share my perspective on where we are at right now. Because I am hopeful that we are at a new moment when we can begin to make true progress in addressing these issues of immigration and our national identity.

So I want to start by talking about the reality of immigration right now in our country, the “human face” of immigration.

I want to follow that by talking specifically about what I believe is the most important moral issue — how we should respond to the 11 million undocumented persons living within our borders. I want to propose a solution today.

And I finally I want to talk about immigration and the “next America.”

So that is my outline. Let’s begin.

## 1. *The Human Face of Immigration*

Our country has been divided over immigration many times before in our history.

We are a nation of immigrants, it is true. But immigration to this country has never been easy. New nationalities and ethnic groups have seldom been welcomed with open arms.

The truth is that with each new wave of immigration have come suspicion, resentment and backlash. Think about the Irish, the Italians, the Japanese. It is no different with today's immigrants. We need to keep that perspective.

But it is also true that our politics today is more divided today than I can ever remember. We seem to have lost the ability to show mercy, to see the "other" as a child of God. And so we are willing to accept injustices and abuses that we should never accept.

That is what has happened on immigration.

By our inaction and indifference we have created a quiet human rights tragedy that is playing out in communities all across this great country.

There is now a vast underclass that has grown up at the margins of our society. And we just seem to accept it as a society. We have millions of men and women living as perpetual servants — working for low wages in our restaurants and fields; in our factories, gardens, homes and hotels.

These men and women have no security against sickness, disability or old age. In many cases they can't even open up a checking account or get a driver's license. They serve as our nannies and baby-sitters. But their own children can't get jobs or go to college — because they were brought to this country illegally by their parents.

Right now the only thing we have that resembles a national immigration "policy" is all focused on deporting these people who are within our borders without proper papers.

Despite what we hear in the mainstream media, deportations did not begin with this new administration. We have needed a moratorium on deportations of non-violent immigrants for almost a decade.

The previous president deported more than anybody in American history — more than 2.5 million people in eight years.

The sad truth is that the vast majority of those we are deporting are *not* violent criminals. In fact, up to one-quarter are mothers and fathers that our government is seizing and removing from ordinary households.

We need to remember that. When we talk about deportation as a policy — remember that we are talking about souls not statistics.

Nobody disputes that we should be deporting violent criminals. Nobody. People have a right to live in safe neighborhoods. But what is the public policy purpose that is served by taking away some little girl's dad or some little boy's mom?

This is what we are doing every day. We are breaking up families and punishing kids for the mistakes of their parents.

Most of the 11 million undocumented people have been living in this country for five years or more. Two-thirds have been here for at least a decade. Almost half are living in homes with a spouse and children.

So what that means is that when you have a policy that is only about deportations — without reforming the underlying immigration system — you are going to cause a human rights nightmare.

And that is what is going on in communities across the country.

I could tell you stories all day long from my ministry in Los Angeles. We have children in our Catholic schools who don't want to leave their homes in the morning because they are afraid they will come back and find their parents gone, deported.

And as a pastor, I do not think it is an acceptable moral response for us to say, "too bad, it's their own fault," or "this is what they get for breaking our laws."

They are still people, still children of God, no matter what they did wrong.

And when you look into the eyes of a child who's parent has been deported — and I have had to do that more than I want to — you realize how inadequate all our excuses are.

My friends, there is an important role here for you and for me — for all of us who believe in God. Because we are the ones who know that God does not judge us according to our political positions.

As we know, Jesus tells us that we are judged by our love, by our mercy. The mercy we expect from God, we need to show to others. Jesus said, "I was a stranger," an immigrant. He did not distinguish between legal and illegal.

We need to help our neighbors to see that people do not cease to be human, they do not cease to be our brothers and sisters — just because they have an irregular immigration status.

No matter how they got here, no matter how frustrated we are with our government, we cannot lose sight of their humanity — without losing our own.

This brings me to my second point — what can we do about the 11 million who are here without authorization?

## 2. *The 11 Million*

My friends, it is long past time for us to address this issue. Here again — as men and women of faith, we have an important role to play. We need to help our leaders find a solution that is realistic, but that is also just and compassionate.

With that in mind, I want to share how I think about this issue as a pastor.

These 11 million undocumented people did not just arrive overnight. It happened over the last 20 years. And it happened because our government — at every level — failed to enforce our immigration laws.

This is a difficult truth that we have to accept. We are a nation of laws. But for many reasons and for many years, our nation chose not to enforce our immigration laws.

Of course, that doesn't justify people breaking these laws. But it does explain how things got this way.

Government and law enforcement officials looked the other way because American businesses demand "cheap" labor — and lots of it.

Now, I believe strongly in personal responsibility and accountability. But I have to question why the only ones we are punishing are the undocumented workers themselves — ordinary parents who came here seeking a better life for their children.

Why aren't we punishing the businesses who hired them, or the government officials who didn't enforce our laws? It just does not seem right to me.

And what about us? It seems to me that we share some responsibility. All of us "benefit" every day from an economy built on undocumented labor. These are the people who clean our offices and build our homes and harvest the food we eat.

There is plenty of blame to go around. And that means there is a lot of opportunity to show mercy. Mercy is not the denial of justice. Mercy is the quality by which we carry out our justice. Mercy is the way we can move forward.

I am not proposing that we "forgive and forget." Those who are here without authorization have broken our laws. And the rule of law must be respected. So there needs to be consequences when our laws are broken.

Right now, we've made deportation a kind of "mandatory sentence" for anyone caught without proper papers. We're not interested in mitigating circumstances or taking into account "hard cases." Illegal immigration may be the only crime for which we don't tolerate plea bargains or lesser sentences.

But I don't think that is fair, either.

Why don't we require the undocumented to pay a fine, to do community service? We should ask them to prove that they are holding a job and paying taxes and are learning English.

This seems like a fair punishment to me.

But in addition to the punishment, we need to give them some clarity about their lives, some certainty about their status living in this country.

Most of the undocumented who are parents have children here who are citizens. They should be able to raise their children in peace, without the fear that one day we will change our minds and deport them. So we need to establish some way for them to "normalize" their status. Personally, I believe we should give them a chance to become citizens.

There's a lot of fear and frustration in this country today. And I understand why some of it is directed at unknown people who have come in through a broken system. But I also want to suggest this to you: We may just need this new generation of immigrants — to be our neighbors, to be our friends, to help us to renew the "soul" of our nation.

There's a balance of law and love we can strike here.

The immigrants that I know are people who have faith in God, who love their families, and who aren't afraid of hard work and sacrifice.

Most have come to this country for the same reasons that immigrants have always come to this country — to seek refuge from violence and poverty; to make a better life for their children. These are the kind of people we should want to be new Americans. These are the people we should want to join us in the work of rebuilding this great country.

And that brings me to my conclusion. I want to offer some reflections on our American "story."

### *3. Immigration and the Next America*

I have been trying to speak practically and realistically about the moral challenges we face with immigration.

Because, my friends, I really do believe that we can reform our immigration system and find a compassionate solution for those who are undocumented and forced to live in the shadows of our society. It is within our reach.

But I also think we need to recognize that immigration is about more than a set of specific policies.

I have come to believe that immigration is ultimately a question about America. What is America? What does it mean to be an American? Who are we as a people and what is this country's mission in the world?

Immigration goes to the heart of America's identity and our future as a nation.

I believe we need to commit ourselves to immigration reform that is part of a more comprehensive renewal of the American spirit. A new sense of our national purpose and identity.

And I think that new awareness should begin right here — in Washington, D.C.

Just down the street from where we are today, just down Pennsylvania Avenue, inside our nation's Capitol building — you will find the statues of three Catholic priests, St. Damien of Molokai, St. Junípero Serra, Father Eusebio Kino. There is also a statue of a religious sister, Mother Joseph of the Sisters of Providence.

It is interesting. They were all immigrants, all of them missionaries.

Now, St. Junípero Serra was a Hispanic, an immigrant from Spain by way of Mexico. He was one of the founders of Los Angeles.

At a time when many denied the “humanity” of the Native peoples, Father Junípero drew up a “bill of rights” for them. He wrote that “bill of rights” — three years before America's Declaration of Independence.

Most Americans today do not know that. But Pope Francis knew that. That's why he canonized St. Junípero right here in Washington, D.C., a couple of years ago.

Pope Francis said St. Junípero was one of this country's “founding fathers.” And yet, most of us do not think of him as part of America's story. We should. If we took this seriously, it would change how we understand our country's history, identity and mission.

And that is the point I want to leave you with today.

Every people has a story they tell about their beginnings. A story about where they came from and how they got here. This “story of origins” helps them make sense of who they are as a people.

Right now, the story we tell about America starts here on the East Coast — Washington, New York, Jamestown, Boston, Philadelphia. We remember the first Thanksgiving, the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War.

That story is not wrong. It's just not complete.

And because it's not complete, it gives the distorted impression that America was founded as a project only of Western Europeans.

It makes us assume that only immigrants from those countries really “belong” and can claim to be called “Americans.”

This misreading of history has obvious implications for our current debates.

We hear warnings all the time from politicians and the media that immigration from Mexico and Latin

America is somehow changing our American “identity” and “character.”

I hear these arguments and I think, what American identity are we talking about?

There has been a Hispanic presence and influence in this country from the beginning, since about 40 years after Christopher Columbus.

The truth is that long before Plymouth Rock, long before George Washington and the 13 colonies; long before this country even had a name — there were missionaries and explorers here from Spain and Mexico and they were settling the territories of what are now Florida, Texas, California, and New Mexico.

The first Asians, from the Philippines, started arriving in California about 50 years before the Pilgrims got to Plymouth Rock.

Something we should think about: the first non-indigenous language spoken in this country was not English. It was Spanish.

None of this denies that America’s laws, institutions and cultural traditions were defined and shaped by Anglo-Saxon and Protestant European ancestors.

But we can no longer afford to tell a story of America that excludes the rich inheritance of Latinos and Asians. That kind of story cannot unite us and inspire us in an America that is changing.

So my friends, I believe we need to embrace a new national narrative, a new patriotic memory.

We need a story of our spiritual roots — a story that honors both our Hispanic Catholic missionary and immigrant beginnings in the South and in the West and a story that honors the European Protestant founders who settled in the North and the East.

We need to tell the story of St. Junípero Serra *and* Thomas Jefferson.

We need to tell a new story to inspire a new generation — to carry on the providential mission of America.

America has always been a nation of immigrants with a missionary soul. Our founders dreamed of a nation where men and women from every race, religion and national background could live in equality as brothers and sisters, children of the same God.

Their universal vision helped make this a great nation — blessed with freedom and goodness and generosity and committed to sharing our blessings with the whole human race.

That is what’s at stake in our immigration debate — the future of this beautiful American story. Our national debate is really a great struggle for the American spirit and the American soul. How we respond will measure our national character and conscience in this generation.

Thank you for allowing me to share my reflections with you today. May God bless you and your families and may God bless this great country.

*+Jose Gomez*

*Archbishop of Los Angeles*