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Immigration and the Catholic Worldview

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Fr. Fitzgibbons, Sister Peg, members of the faculty, my dear brother and sisters in Christ, it is a joy to be here with you this evening. Thank you for the invitation.

Let us take a moment to invite the Lord into our conversation. Let's begin with prayer. Let us pray especially, in this Easter season, for the gift of the Spirit of the Risen Christ:

God our Father, you are the creator and father of us all. We are your sons and daughters, redeemed by Christ your Son, and adopted into your family. You have made us brothers and sisters in your love. Grant us, O Lord, the grace to see one another through your eyes, and to love one another with your love. In this Easter season, pour forth the gift of the Spirit of love into our hearts. Give us the grace to love in freedom, and in truth. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

I am grateful to be able to spend some time with you, especially to reflect on a very important, and obviously pressing, national issue.

Regis University is a Catholic university, and conversations about immigration are exactly the kinds of things that Catholic universities ought to be sponsoring.

Blessed John Paul II said that Catholic universities are about “proclaiming the meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished.” As Catholics we believe in truth, objective truth that can be known through faith and reason. Objective truth binds every human being.

Conversations about immigration are really about the values of freedom, justice, and human dignity. Without knowing truth, we cannot know what freedom is or justice is. Without knowing objective truth, human dignity is a meaningless idea.

When the objective truth of human dignity is not acknowledged and held, human beings then become expendable as we can observe in history: in Nazi Germany, in the gulags of Russia, in the killing fields of Cambodia, in the forced abortions in China.

The truth, of course, begins and ends with God the Father—with the love of the Trinity, and with God's love for us. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. I am a pastor, a shepherd of souls, and so I'm here with you today to preach Jesus Christ. But I want to do that in a way which offers some insight into this important topic of immigration.

In America, all of us have been affected quite directly by immigration. Most of us are the descendants of immigrants. There may be some Native Americans here, and even a brief look at America's history demonstrates that Native Americans have been impacted by immigration as much as anyone by immigration. This is a nation of immigrants—we're united by a national creed, a set of common ideals, and the fact is that nearly all of our families come from somewhere else.

My four grandparents came from the same small town in Sicily. The Italian economy had nothing to offer them. One set of my great-grandparents had gone to America around 1900. They emigrated from Sicily to Ohio. My grandmother followed her parents. In 1907, she and my grandfather left Sicily, and began a new life, with their family, in Ohio. In 1920, my other set of grandparents left the same Sicilian town. They came with little money or clothing, travelled across the Atlantic for 30 days on a packed immigration ship, they knew no English and they began their new life. None of them permanently returned to Sicily. They left everything they had because they needed what America had to offer:

the prospect of jobs, of stability, of schools, and doctors, and enough food to feed their children.

Sicily is a beautiful place. I go back often as I still have cousins there. But for my family, America was the only land of opportunity they could find. Many of us have stories like mine. In the family lore of most Americans is the tale of economic hardship, a harrowing journey, and a new opportunity—an entirely new life—in America.

In fact, the waves of European immigrants who came to America are a part of our national story. 1.3 million Europeans came to America in 1907, the year my grandparents did. Their stories shaped our national identity.

But the truth is that the golden age of immigration in America is today. Since 2000, America has received 1 million legal immigrants each year. As many as 1.5 million people come each year illegally, crossing the border in dangerous, sometimes fatal ways. There are 40 million legal immigrants now living in this country. There are another 10 million plus who have come without paperwork or permission—thus they are here illegally.

But immigration today looks different from what has happened in the past. Today, many people come to America to work, to save and send money home, and then to return to their countries. Fewer people come to America with plans to stay forever. More people—especially more men—come alone, and live as migrants, travelling where the work is in order to send money home.

People come to America because there is work here. We have an economic system which needs a steady supply of low-wage, relatively unskilled laborers. Whether our economic system is just is an important question that needs to be explored. However, today I want to focus on immigration.

The fact is that in America, we rely on immigrant labor in agriculture, in the service industry, and in oil and mineral extraction, among other places. There are real opportunities here to

provide for families who would otherwise live in dire and absolute poverty. There are parts of Central America where the largest element of the local economy comes from the money sent by workers in the United States.

Immigration has changed in America. It is increasingly temporary, and increasingly undocumented. Despite the opportunities for work in the United States, fewer people are able to obtain working visas. No one should break the law. But laws should be sensible—they should reflect the needs of nations and the needs of immigrants.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in #2241, teaches that:

“...more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him.”¹

The right to migration is a right which is rooted in natural law. Pope Pius XII, in 1948, reflected that “the natural law itself...urges that ways of migration be opened to...those who have been forced by revolutions in their own countries, or by unemployment or hunger to leave their homes and live in foreign lands.”

Pope Pius XII said that Americans are stewards of natural resources which could support a large population. He said that when a nation’s resources “offer the possibility of supporting a large number of people,” it should do so. “For the Creator of the universe” he stated, “made all good things primarily for the good of all.”

We have an obligation in America to welcome foreigners in search of security and a just livelihood. The obligation is tempered by an assessment of our own economic condition. If we are unable to welcome more people seeking jobs, we shouldn’t. I’m not a politician, or an economist or in the legal profession. I am a pastor. But the number of immigrants employed in this country suggests that there is a need, and an ability, to welcome immigrants to

America. From the perspective of a pastor, it seems we are able, as a nation, to help those seeking stability.

Yet immigration law is broken in America. Our system is set up for the immigration patterns of the past—for families traveling together, working in a manufacturing economy, and intending to stay permanently. We need comprehensive immigration reform. If we undertake immigration reform in accord with natural law—in accord with truth—there are certain principles we should uphold.

I'd like to reflect on three principles of critical importance in the reform of American immigration policy.

The first is that immigration stems from economic disparity between nations. Few people leave strong economies to work in weak ones. The combined GDP of the top-ten migrant producing countries is less than the GDP of the United States. So if we want to consider immigration justly, we will first consider whether our own economic policy supports economic growth and administrative integrity in other countries. And we'll encourage other nations to strengthen their domestic economies.

Immigration stems in part from the natural cycles of economic and population change. But it also stems from the corruption, greed, and dysfunction of many corners of the global economy. Large experiments in socialism and communism across the globe have led to considerable poverty and have failed. So has the unchecked greed which corrupts capitalism. Global leaders who see people leaving their country in droves should ask themselves what is wrong. When people are fleeing a nation, it's time to get serious about economic and political reform.

In light of this, raiding a meat-packing plant as happened in Greeley and in many other places, and deporting workers, won't solve systematic economic problems or the problem of undocumented immigration. Too often, targeting immigrants does more damage than good as the workers are needed, and it often ends up separating families. Calling for political and

economic reform across the globe is an important place to begin.

The second principle is that nations have a right to security, and this begins with secure borders, and with stemming the tide of illegal immigration. If we need immigrants in the country, or if we can support them, we ought to make entry into the country easier and faster. We should be especially attentive to people coming from situations of extreme duress. Yet, 12 years ago, our nation suffered a terrible blow, in the attack of September 11th. None of us will ever forget that day. I can remember exactly where I was when the news began to break. And our government shouldn't either. It was a day that changed our immigration laws and changed air travel.

Government has the responsibility to ensure that those who have come here are not criminals, or terrorists. If amnesty is to be granted to undocumented immigrants already in this country, we have the right and responsibility to look into their backgrounds. And we have the right to expect other countries to assist us in securing our borders.

It is possible, in the most extreme circumstances, that justification for breaking immigration laws might be found. This is particularly true when visa laws are onerous and time-consuming. But for the most part, those aspiring to enter our country should follow the law. And we have the right to enforce immigration policies, even as we work to make them more just.

The third principle I want to discuss is the most important.

The moral theologian Johannes Messner wrote in 1958 that "the family is prior to the state. It holds natural rights which the state is bound to recognize."

Families are the building blocks of every culture and all of social life. The union of man and woman in marriage is a relationship ordained and protected by God himself. The children born of that union always have the right to a mother and a father, who can care for them and love them. In fact, Messner says that the "prominent task of the

state” is “to make it possible for families to fulfill their natural function.”

Immigration policy which respects the sovereignty of the family makes it possible for husbands and wives, and their children, to obtain visas together, easily, even when only the father will work. Respecting the family means finding alternatives to deportation when families will be torn apart by it. And government always has the responsibility to ensure that all workers can earn a just wage, one which allows them to be open to life, and to support the children God gives them.

Today, immigrants are too often viewed solely through a financial lens. They are viewed as workers, and reduced merely to their economic potential.

They are treated as objects. But immigrants are members of families, and those families are essential to our social order. They have something to contribute to our national order, because they are human beings, endowed with real dignity. Immigrant families have always contributed to the richness of our culture—particularly the richness of American Catholic culture.

As we face the breakdown of the family in this country, we should recognize that supporting families through immigration law may be our clearest hope to the restoration of Christian culture in the United States.

A few months ago, I was talking with a person about the breakdown of the family and the breakdown of morals in our society. I spoke especially in reference to the inherent dignity of human life from the time of conception until natural death and that every human being needs to be respected. I said if we continue to drift from moral values and the dignity of the family and human life our country will fall. He responded to me that all societies and cultures eventually fall and so will ours, we should just hope it is not in our lifetime.

I was shocked by this perspective. It is a fatalistic approach, one grounded in despair that does not see any hope for the future. In a secular world,

where there is no God, there is no hope. We have observed how secular our country and state have become in the last decade. There are many who want God, moral values, and natural law removed from the state and from conversation. As Catholics we have the responsibility to give witness to the hope that our faith gives and most especially to the inherent dignity of the human person.

I hope to be more than the little Dutch boy, trying desperately to hold back the flood of erosion of our civilization. I hope that America can become a civilization of love and return to its roots. Promoting family life and the dignity of the human person through immigration law is a way to promote a civilization of love, and a culture of life. Catholics must be willing to give witness to their faith and to the truth in the public square.

I began with the story of my own immigrant family. I asked you to recall your own. But I would like to conclude with the story of an immigrant family from long ago—the story of the Holy Family. Mary and Joseph were driven from Bethlehem to Egypt. Herod not respecting human dignity ordered the slaughter of all males under the age of two in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary fled by night with the child Jesus across a vast desert. It was in Egypt that Christ was raised. Like today’s immigrants, they did not stay forever. They stayed as long as they needed to, and then they returned home.

I do not know if Mary and Joseph were welcomed in Egypt. I do not know if they were treated justly. But I do know this: Jesus Christ was an immigrant.

If we find ways to welcome the immigrants around us, to respect their dignity and freedom, to treat them with justice--- we will have welcomed Jesus Christ, and the Holy Family. We see in the face of every immigrant, and for that matter, in the face of every human being, the face of Christ. Whatever we do for the immigrants among us, we will have done for Christ, Our Lord.

Thank you. 

Notes

¹ United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1997), #2241.

Bibliography

United States Catholic Conference. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1997.