NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The ax is laid to the root of the tree: An argument for the Dream Act

Pat Marrin | Dec. 10, 2010 NCR Today

In the confusion of voices now vying for our attention, from our struggling economy (?Shopping is a patriotic act!?) and from a venomous Washington (?We cannot afford the future!?), another, barely audible voice is telling us the truth. It is the voice of Advent, and it is telling us that as a country we are in danger of losing our souls.

As Congress struts and frets over who is fiscally most responsive to the American people, a small initiative that will cost nothing and reap huge benefits for this country is being held hostage in the massive tax debate as a way to score political points. Passage of the ?Dream Act? would affect thousands of young people brought to this country as children by undocumented parents. It would let them pursue college or join the military. The bill was first introduced in 2001 and has always had bipartisan support. Failure to pass it now will sink its chances ? and the hopes of some of the best and the brightest of a generation eager to work hard to find a future here. The alternative is to abandon them to legal limbo or to arrest and deport them all to whatever country their parents came from, though they have never known life anywhere but in the United States.

Americans who think deporting them is a good idea also believe that any reform equals amnesty, that all immigrants are taking jobs away from Americans, paying no taxes, stealing billions of dollars from our social welfare and health care systems, coming here only to have babies, spread drugs and disease, that immigrants are a threat to national security and, if allowed to cross the desert and climb our walls, will threaten the racial status quo of this country. No discussion about any of this is possible despite the facts and a thousand Google sites that address ?myths about immigration.?

Because, next to gay marriage and prayer in the schools, immigration reform is the easiest way to stampede the uninformed but always opinionated dittoheads holding a huge megaphone paid for by the same people who are telling Congress what to do on taxes, any reform of our broken INS system is in doubt. The fate of the Dream Act will tell us whether any kind of reform will happen when the new Congress convenes in January. ?We the People? may be represented by people who think they have a mandate to dismantle the historic social compact that once created our diverse culture and made us the envy the rest of the world.

And if dismantling is what we get, it is time to listen hard to that fading voice warning us that if we close the door on 11 million people now among us waiting for a path to legal status, and millions more who dream of coming to this country for the same reasons our grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and neighbors came here -- to give us a chance to be here, then we will be closing the door on ourselves. We can stop saying we are a nation of immigrants, the land of opportunity, a shining city on the hill, the land of the free and the home of the brave.

We have already, it seems begun to wield the axe that severs the very root of the tree we call America. Once inside the walled fortress we imagine will protect us from a scary, complex world, we will witness, as Jerusalem once saw its broken covenant with God, the withering of our own dreams for ourselves and our children.

Our failure to see this coming will not be because we are selfish, because this is not about charity but mostly a matter of self-interest, simple due process, a policy that acknowledges our need for low-wage workers and welcomes them legally and treats them fairly, and about family preservation as a good thing for our communities, and for our own sense of integrity.

Join us at *Celebration's* Conference on Effective Liturgy: A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church's Global Commitment to the Poor. [1]

Advent 2010 could be our last chance to check the map. A prophet cries out in the wilderness: ?Even now the ax is laid the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire? (Matt 3:10).

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, the worship resource of the National Catholic Reporter. The issues aired in this article will be part of conference on immigration reform sponsored by Celebration in San Antonio , Jan 12-14. Visit www.celebrationpublications.org/conference for more information.]

Source URL (retrieved on *03/26/2015 - 21:04*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/ax-laid-root-tree-argument-dream-act

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