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Conference calls for 'comprehensive and just' immigration reform

by Zoe Ryan



Bishop George Murry of the Youngstown diocese speaks to attendees at an immigration conference in Kansas City, Mo. Feb. 5. (NCR photo/Zoe Ryan)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The message "to welcome the stranger" reverberated throughout the weekend here at an immigration conference sponsored by the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. Panels of immigrants, bishops, church ministries, and immigrant aid groups urged reform during the conference, located at Rockhurst University.

After a Mass concelebrated by Bishop Robert Finn of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese and Bishop George Murry of the Youngstown diocese, some 200 conference participants heard keynote speaker Murry discuss the church teachings on immigration and the need to reform current U.S. immigration policies.

"Working together and committing to the defense of human life and committing to justice, we must encourage our political leaders to proclaim a year of favor from our God and find better ways to welcome

the stranger, and not only welcome but allow that stranger to become a full-member, a full-participant of American society," Murry said.

The bishops have argued that the current immigration laws must be reformed to meet the country's need for labor and facilitate the reunification of families, the latter of which is a major issue for the bishops, he continued.

"The only way to reduce the number of newcomers coming to the United States who are illegal is to improve the social and economic conditions in places such as Mexico and Central America," he said.

Immigration conferences are becoming more common in dioceses across the U.S. Next month the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and The Catholic University of America will co-host a conference in Washington, D.C., detailing the social and policy perspectives of the debate.

Their efforts go back to June 2004 when the board of directors of the Committee on Migration of the bishops' conference and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., started a major push toward immigration reform outreach.

Murry said he and other bishops are arguing for reform that is "both comprehensive and just" -- including:

- A legalization program or a "path to citizenship" that gives migrant families a way to earn citizenship;
- A new worker visa program that protects U.S. and foreign workers;
- Reform of the U.S. family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times for family reunification;
- And restoration of due process protection for immigrants including asylum seekers.

The U.S. bishops supported the DREAM Act, which failed to garner enough support in the U.S. Senate last December. The bill would have granted residency status to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as minors and have graduated from high school.

Because people migrate to the U.S. for jobs, Murry cited six outcomes of the bishops' proposals.

The proposals will help keep families together; recognize the economic contributions immigrants give; improve immigrant wages and working conditions; create new jobs for Americans; bring U.S. immigration policy in line with economic policy; and improve national security, Murry said.

Panels of immigrants and immigrant aid groups spoke on Saturday morning to different sessions. Immigrants told their personal stories to conference-goers. The sessions discussed myths about immigration and what parishes are doing or can do to connect the issue of immigration to Catholic Social Teaching. Church ministers discussed what they were doing to incorporate immigrant parishioners into the church community.

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Other sessions included speakers from agencies that provide direct services to immigrants, including Legal Aid of Western Missouri, the Migrant Farmworkers Project, Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas, and Jewish Vocational Services.

Jude Huntz, diocesan director of human rights for the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, directed the conference. He said he was contacted to do more conferences like this one. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops called him and "were just thrilled" that the diocese was holding this conference, Huntz said.

Today, Feb. 7, he will meet with Finn to plan for an annual conference somewhere in the area open to all people in the Midwest.

The conference chose its February timeslot because of the former Guilfoil Justice Day, a justice conference that was held in February each year in honor of Benedictine Sr. Mary Alice Guilfoil, who directed the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocesan peace and justice office in the 1990s. Guilfoil died in 1998.

[Zoe Ryan is an *NCR* intern. Her e-mail address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

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