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

For LA Archbishop Gomez, the issue is personal

Tom Roberts | Mar. 24, 2011
Immigration and the Church

Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles, right, greets Mexican Archbishop Rafael Romo Munoz of Tijuana at The Catholic University of America in Washington March 21. The two were attending a church conference on pastoral, policy and social issues surrounding immigration. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

A recent conference on ?The Catholic Church and Immigration: Pastoral, Policy and Social Perspectives? provided a measure of the church?s seriousness about influencing the national debate and convincing the wider church, in Pope John Paul II?s words, that ?no one is a stranger, and the church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere.? Among the presentations given March 21 was a speech in the evening by Archbishop Jose H. Gomez, the recently installed Archbishop of Los Angeles.

As Gomez notes (the full text is below) this is more than a theoretical issue for him. He is, first, an immigrant who still has family ?on both sides of the border.? He also is ?a proud citizen of the United States,? who understands the effects of globalization and who also has a high regard for the rule of law.

All of those factors, of course, are subsumed in his identity as a Catholic Christian, who understands the church?s view of immigration as "rooted in the vision of human society that was taught to us by Jesus Christ."

As a practical matter, Gomez would like to see a moratorium on new state laws regarding immigration; a cessation of the harsh workplace search and deportation operations that end up separating parents and children; and a path to eventual citizenship.

The talk is a powerful witness to his personal story and to the vision of the church in solving the immigration chaos we now experience.

The full text of his speech follows.

The Immigration Debate and U.S.-Mexico Relations: A Catholic Perspective

The Most Rev. José H. Gomez
Archbishop of Los Angeles
Chairman, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration

Catholic University of America
March 21, 2011

I want to say thank you to Archbishop Romo, Ambassador Sarukhan, and Assistant Secretary Schwartz for your participation in tonight?s program.

We are at an important moment in the relationship between Mexico and the United States. I want to talk about that relationship tonight as it relates to migration between our two countries, and especially the debate over immigration here in the United States.

I have three basic goals tonight: First, I want to outline what I believe to be the root issues with U.S.-Mexican migration. Second, I want to explain the Catholic Church?s approach to these issues. Third and finally, I want to make some suggestions and observations about the current debate in light of Catholic principles.

To start, I need to say two things. First, this issue is personal for me. I am an immigrant myself. My people come from both Mexico and America. I was born and raised in Monterrey, Mexico. My ancestors have been in what?s now Texas since 1805, when it was still under Spanish rule. I still have family on both sides of the border.

I am also a proud citizen of the United States. I love this country and I love the values that it was founded to defend and promote.

I also need to point out something obvious. I am not a politician or a diplomat or an expert in the global economy. I am a Catholic archbishop. That means I am a priest and a pastor of souls. In everything, my concern is to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to defend and promote the dignity of the human person who is made in the image of God.

I don?t have technical solutions or statistical analysis to offer. But I do think the Catholic Church has a unique and important perspective to offer on these issues.

But before I talk about that I want to outline briefly what I think are the root issues underlying the immigration crisis facing our two countries.

For me, the issue is rooted in the processes of economic globalization.

Globalization has expanded opportunities for businesses and for workers. But it has also created new problems in the relationships between our nations. The biggest problem is that while we have developed laws and policies to govern the flow of capital and money, we have no standards for the movement of laborers.

For instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement eliminated tariffs and many restrictions on trade and business in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. But it didn?t include a treaty concerning the mobility of persons.

Money, capital, and other resources now flow more freely between our nations. But human beings ? the men and women who do the work ? cannot. In the new global economy, there are many safeguards for businesses

and financial institutions but very few for workers.

Globalization has exposed ? and in some cases made worse ? the economic inequalities that exist within and between our nations. To put it very simply: As long as workers can earn more in one hour in the U.S. than they can earn in a day or a week in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, they will continue to seek, by any means necessary, to migrate to this country.

That?s my first point. The primary issues effecting migration between our two countries are economic. People are not so much fleeing tyranny or persecution as they are seeking work and a better future for their families.

My second point is this: The Catholic Church?s approach to immigration is not about politics or economics. It is rooted in the vision of human society that was taught to us by Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church, from the time of the first Pentecost, has been a family of nations. By definition, the Catholic Church is ?universal,? one family of God drawn from all nations, peoples, and languages.

In fact, the Catholic Church in the United States is a kind of microcosm of what Jesus intended his Church to be. We are in this country a Church of nearly 60 different ethnic groups ? from Asia, Africa, the Near East and Latin America. More than one-third of the Catholics in our country today are Hispanic.

The point is that in the Catholic Church and in the eyes of God, no one is a stranger or an alien. Practically speaking also, U.S.-Mexican immigration for us is a religious and family issue. Because the vast majority of the immigrants we are talking about are Catholics, they are our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

The Church?s approach to these issues starts from Christ?s command to preach the good news of God?s love for all peoples. It starts from Christ?s call that we transform the city of man into the family of God.

What many people don?t realize is that Jesus Christ himself was an immigrant and a refugee.

This is how the Church understands the account in the Gospel of how Jesus,Mary and Joseph were forced into exile in Egypt when Herod sought to kill Jesus.

Pope Benedict XVI has said this:

In this misfortune experienced by the family of Nazareth, obliged to take refuge in Egypt, we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition in which all migrants live. ? The hardships and humiliations, the deprivation and fragility of millions and millions of migrants. ?. The family of Nazareth reflects the image of God safeguarded in the heart of every human family, even if disfigured and weakened by emigration.

Those are beautiful words of concern. And they reflect a long tradition in the Church that goes back to the Gospels.

Christians have always practiced hospitality. The Church has always worked to defend the stranger and care for the immigrant. Even the Roman emperors, who hated the Christians, were amazed by their ?benevolence to strangers.?

Catholics care for immigrants because Jesus commanded it. Because he told us that we must seek God and serve God in the least of our brothers and sisters. Jesus said that when we serve those who are hungry and homeless, in prison and sick, we are serving him.

He even made a point of talking about immigrants and refugees. He said: ?I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me? (Matt. 25:35, 40).

In the course of 2,000 years, the Church has developed a body of social teachings that are based on the principles of reason and the values of the Gospel. I wish more people knew the Church?s social teaching ? including more Catholics. Because this teaching is a real contribution to human civilization. It offers us a powerful vision for how human society can function for the common good and the dignity of all people.

On immigration, the Church has formed three basic principles.

The first principle is this: The human family is one, although we have different ethnic origins and we are spread across different continents, regions, and national boundaries. God has made us to be one family.

And God did not create the good things of this earth ? its natural resources and opportunities ? only for the privileged few. Or only for people in certain countries. God intends the good things of his creation to be shared by all, no matter where we are born or where we find ourselves living.

The second principle is the sanctity of the human person and the family. Our right to life comes from God. That right does not depend on the whims of politicians or powerful people. That right does not depend on economic or political forces. Our rights come from God. And no man, no institution, and no set of circumstances can justify denying those rights.

On this point of the inalienable rights of the person, we should notice that the Church?s teachings are consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and also with the charter of liberties in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.
For us, the universal human rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness imply the right to emigrate ? to leave our country if we must, to seek a better life for our families and ourselves. In a world divided by war, famine, persecution, and economic dislocations, immigration becomes a crucial guarantee of our right to life.

The Church?s third principle is that governments have the right to control migration into their countries and to defend their borders. This is important. It means that nations must look at their security and their economic interests in making decisions about who and how many people they allow into their countries. It means that immigrants must respect the laws of the countries they emigrate to.

But the Church also teaches that national sovereignty should never be used as an excuse to deny the rights of needy and decent people who are seeking their livelihood. No country can deny this basic human right to migrate out of exaggerated fears for national security or selfish concerns about threats to domestic jobs or standards of living.

Those are the Church?s principles. Based on these on these principles, the American bishops have supported a comprehensive reform of our immigration policies that would secure our borders and give undocumented immigrants the chance to earn permanent residency and eventual citizenship.

Also based on these principles the bishops have started our ?Justice for Immigrants? campaign. And back in 2003, the U.S. and Mexican bishops wrote an important joint pastoral letter called ?Strangers No Longer.?

All of these initiatives are intended as a thoughtful response to the crisis facing our two countries. I recommend them to you. I believe you will find in them many concrete proposals that could be embraced by all people of good will.

As my final point tonight, let me offer a some observations on the current impasse we have reached in the debate over immigration in this country.

I understand the political frustration over this issue. There has been a failure of leadership ? and this failure of leadership cuts across party lines. The reasons for the stalemate on this issue are understandable ? from a political standpoint. But from a moral standpoint, the results are intolerable and inexcusable.

Again, I am not a politician, but a pastor of souls. As a pastor, I am deeply concerned about the costs of this impasse in the lives of millions of men, women, and children.

Not just the souls of the 12 million without papers who are living at the margins of our society. I am worried about their physical, moral, and spiritual health. When you are a stranger in a strange land ? and unwanted ? you are easy prey for exploitation. But more than that. When you are a stranger who is despised, it gets harder every day to hold onto your cultural identity, your moral compass, your religion, your dignity. You start to believe what people say about you ? that you are no good.

But I?m also worried about our social fabric and civic debate. Right now in this country, there are a lot of people ? a lot of good people ? who are saying things they know they should never be saying about immigrants. Their anger and frustration is understandable. But their rhetoric and many of their political responses are not worthy of America?s proud history as a beacon of hope for the world?s poor and persecuted.

Our current policies of enforcement ? workplace raids, detentions, and deportations ? are a humanitarian tragedy. We are destroying families in the name of enforcing our laws.

It is true that many immigrants are in our country illegally. That bothers me. I don?t like it when our rule of law is flouted. And I support just and appropriate punishments. But right now, we are imposing penalties that leave wives without husbands, children without parents. We are deporting fathers and leaving single mothers to raise children on little to no income.

We are a better people than that. We have always been a nation of justice and law. But we have also been a nation of mercy and forgiveness. We can find a better way. I think it begins with the Catholic perspective. It begins in seeing immigrants as human beings. As mothers and fathers. As children of God.

Practically speaking, I would like to see a moratorium on new state and local immigration legislation. And, as the U.S. bishops have called for, I would like to see an end to the harsh federal work-site enforcement raids and the severe deportation policies.

We need to push for protections of the most vulnerable migrants ? children and women, who often fall prey to unscrupulous traffickers and others. We also need reforms in how we issue visas, especially for immigrants and people here illegally who have families.

I also would like to see our two governments begin to talk about some of the underlying issues. We need to find ways encourage economic reforms and developments throughout Latin America, especially in the poorest countries in the region. We need to find ways to target economic development so that far fewer Mexicans will feel compelled to leave their homes to seek jobs and money in other countries. It is especially important that we work to promote small business and agriculture.

All of these measures would make a real difference in the lives of millions of people. But they are only temporary. We need to muster the political will to fix our broken immigration system. We need to find a way to

make the strangers in our midst our fellow citizens.

I believe that today?s immigrants ? like generations of immigrants before them ? are the hope for tomorrow?s America.

I appreciate your attention tonight, my brothers and sisters. And I am grateful for all that you are doing ? and will continue to do ? to promote the cause of human dignity and the common good in every aspect of the relationships between our two countries. I look forward to continuing our conversation.

Immigration and the Church To see all of *NCR*'s coverage of immigration, see our new blog: **Immigration and the Church** [1]. To receive a weekly e-mail update with highlights from the blog, **follow this link** [2] to the sign-up page. If you already receive e-mail alerts from NCR, add **Immigration and the Church** to your profile.

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