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The Church & The Maryland DREAM Act

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Opponents of the Maryland DREAM Act have garnered a sufficient number of signatures to delay implementation of the law and to put the measure to a referendum of voters in 2012. This has ugly implications not only for immigrants, but for the very health of our political life, which is not exactly flourishing to begin with. On the other hand, there is, as almost always, a silver lining.

The Maryland DREAM Act is quite narrow in focus. It permits children of undocumented workers, who were brought to this country as children and who have attended Maryland public schools, to apply for admission into state-run universities and pay the in-state tuition cost. No state government can confer citizenship, which is the goal of the federal DREAM Act. But, the moral logic is the same: We should not penalize a child for a decision their parents? made on their behalf. Of course, I do not think we should punish anyone who has come to the U.S. without documents or over-stayed their visas the past few decades as our economic and social policies have encouraged such migration and the human dignity of the immigrants demands that we find a better solution than mass deportations, but that is another story.

The economic justification for the Maryland DREAM Act is obvious. It makes a huge difference to any family if they can pay $8,655 per year for in-state tuition as opposed to $26,026 for out-of-state tuition. The total cost of the program is expected to reach no more than $3.5 million by 2016, but the additional earnings power of college graduates is such that the state would more than recoup that investment in taxes paid over the years. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that giving undocumented immigrants access to college educations will bring in $2.3 billion, with a ?b? over ten years.

But, the opposition is trying to kindle a sense of grievance and competition to defeat the DREAM Act. They warn that somehow this program will deny citizens their rights, crowd them out of state universities, etc. This is hogwash as a policy concern. Only a few hundred students are expected to participate in the program and, besides, the law specifically indicated that students who qualify for in-state tuition under the DREAM Act would not lower the percentage of in-state students at any of Maryland?s public universities. The opposition?s stance, however, is not hogwash as a political device. During tough economic times, everyone wants a scapegoat, and creating an ?us vs. them? dynamic, sadly, often has a certain populist appeal. Read a little about the ugly history of nativism and you will see that such demagogic appeals are often successful.

Recently, I noted [1]that the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington, joined by the Diocese of Wilmington which covers parts of eastern Maryland, have formed a Task Force to educate Catholics about the DREAM Act. Here is a grand opportunity for the Church not only to defend some of its new and fastest growing members, but an opportunity to combat some of the ugly racial stereotypes that persist even among Catholics. The Church has the opportunity to point out that nowhere does the Church commend competition as a model for social cohesion. Nowhere does the Church?s teaching dabble in permissible racial hatreds. Nowhere does the Church?s teaching allow us to look at some fellow human beings as less worthy of opportunity and less deserving of dignity. Nowhere does the Church?s teaching indicate that we are permitted to treat immigrants in any other fashion than the Scriptures dictate. In Exodus 22:21, we read, ?You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were

aliens in the land of Egypt.?

The value of engaging this debate for the Church is still deeper. Many who invoke the Scripture or cop a pose of religious seriousness fail to embrace the cause of immigrant rights. Some preachers carry on about homosexuality with great frequency although, if the Bible were their guide, they would need to deliver about fifty sermons on immigration for every one on homosexuality. More importantly, the Church has the opportunity to invite her members to understand that our moral teachings flow from our anthropological beliefs, and that is something we are rarely given the opportunity to do. We believe the immigrant has the same dignity as you and I do because we believe that we are all children of God, indeed all brothers and sisters because of the common Fatherhood of God.

In Maryland, not a single Republican legislator voted for the DREAM Act. Many of these same Republicansd support the Church when it comes to abortion. But, our moral beliefs about the wrongness of abortion are rooted in the same anthropological beliefs about the innate human dignity of the immigrant. Conversely, many of the Democrats who oppose the Church on abortion are with the Church on immigration. If the Church stands with them, works with them, and explains our Catholic reasons for supporting immigrants, might we not have a better chance of explaining to those same Democrats why we are so committed to defend the innate human dignity of the unborn?

There is one other side to this story that does not really concern the Church but it should concern voters. The laws permitting popular referendums in this country grew out of the Progressive Movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Back then, there was no internet. Today, getting 100,000 signatures is not ample evidence of popular will. I do not doubt that you could get 100,000 signatures to declare Maryland an officially atheist state or to make the squirrel the state animal or to declare every third Wednesday a public holiday. A few clicks on a mouse can lead people to the places to sign the petitions. As regular readers know, I have a soft spot for diurect democracy because I grew up in a small town that is still governed by its annual town meeting. But, that is a town of 1,500 people not a state of several millions. Direct democracy is, generally speaking, not a good idea. But, because of the ease with which signatures are gathered given our technological advances, it is time to revisist the rules governing demands for a special referendum.

So, the Church has its work cut out for it. In a sense, I am glad the opponents of the DREAM Act have put this measure on the ballot. It gives the Church a great opportunity to engage the political process at a deeper level, and to instruct our people in how our faith informs our politics, not just the other way round. Let?s hope the Catholic community rises to the occasion. The bishops appear to have done so. Now, it is up to us in the laity to make the case to our fellow citizens: We do not punish children for the decisions of their parents, we don?t cut off our noses to spite our faces and, most importantly, if you assault the human dignity of anyone, from the unborn to the immigrant, you are going to have to climb over the Catholic Church to get your way.

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