

## Abp Gomez on Immigration at K of C

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 4, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Earlier this week, [I called attention to a speech](#) [1] given by Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles to the Napa Institute about immigration and America's national story. Yesterday, at the Knights of Columbus Convention, [Archbishop Gomez again addressed the issue](#) [2].

This is very important. The Knights of Columbus was founded in the late nineteenth century to serve the needs of the largely immigrant Catholic community. They needed a fraternal association to provide for each others' basic human needs, for their families and especially for the poor and the widows and the orphans. You can still discern evidence of those roots in their on-going insurance programs. The Knights are exceedingly generous in raising money for Catholic schools, another on-going proof of their fidelity to their founding. They are at the forefront of the fight to defend the unborn. And, as most pastors will tell you, the Knights tend to be among the most active members of their parish. If you flip through the pages of their monthly magazine, you will find stories about all these activities.

But, there has been one issue that has been noticeably absent from those pages: immigration. The children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the founding generation of the Knights were not immigrants to these shores. In some areas, their ethnic identity is still strong, especially in a city like New Haven where the Knights have their headquarters. In New Haven, even today, the most forceful arguments about orthodoxy do not have to do with any article of the Nicene Creed but with whether you prefer Pepe's or Sally's pizza! But, the children of immigrants do not view America through the same lens as their parents.

What has been lost among many descendants of immigrants, however, is any sense of solidarity with those who are immigrants today. Congressman Lou Barletta of Hazleton, Pennsylvania gained national fame when, as mayor of his hometown, he pushed through a viciously anti-immigrant law. He represents the grievances of many white, working class ethnics to whom the last quarter of the twentieth century has not been kind. For them, NAFTA was a bad deal. For them, increases in productivity that boost a company's profits also entails fewer jobs. For them, especially those who are older and who lack the skills to flourish in an information-driven economy, the last few decades have been about declining wages, lost jobs and, consequently, lost health care, a lower standard of living and, the evaporation, slowly but surely, of the American Dream.

The Knights of Columbus perfectly exemplifies the demographic of white, working class ethnics. The question is whether they will indulge the politics of resentment cultivated by the likes of Barletta or see in today's immigrants what Archbishop Gomez invited them to see: an opportunity.

The American Dream still shines brightly in the hearts of today's immigrants. They have come to America, as Archbishop Gomez noted, for the exact same reasons earlier generations of immigrants came to America, to seek a better life for themselves and their families. As the Church teaches, we are bound to them as fellow human beings, whose God-given dignity is inviolable and trumps all concerns of race or ethnicity or legal status. The important thing for us is to approach these political issues not as Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives but as Catholics, said Gomez.

The Knights of Columbus represent, not just in their work, but by their very existence, the three pillars of Catholic social teaching. They are the kind of intermediate social organization, between the state and the individual, called for by subsidiarity. They exist to engender solidarity among the members and between the members and the broader Church and community. And, they promote the Common Good by bring the leaven of the Gospels into civil society. Those three great pillars of Catholic social teaching also point the way forward to a sensible reform of our immigration laws. The reforms must acknowledge the importance of family, and extended family, in deference to subsidiarity. The reforms must promote solidarity between immigrants and those who are already U.S. citizens, and not set up a regime of competition. And, the reforms must promote the Common Good.

In his speech to the Napa Institute, Archbishop Gomez noted that the late Samuel Huntington has criticized "the culture of Catholicism" that the new immigrants bring because, among other things, it "does not value self-initiative or the work ethic, and instead encourages passivity and an acceptance of poverty." I think it is wrong to say that a catholic culture "accepts" poverty. But, I do know that if you want to see the clearest dividing line between a Catholic and a Calvinist culture, you have only to look at how those cultures treat the poor. The Calvinist values of thrift, economy, the work ethic, and self-reliance tend towards a view of the poor as slovenly, lazy, lacking in gumption. We have begun to hear an anti-poor drumbeat in certain political circles. When you hear a politician talk about "broadening the tax base" that is code for ending the Earned Income Tax Credit which helps the working poor climb out of poverty by diminishing or eliminating their tax burden. (Incidentally, the policy was begun by a Republican, President George H.W. Bush.) When you hear health care benefits described as "reparations" you know that a bit of racism is being added to the mix as well. And, you do not have to spend much time consulting the works of the economic and political theorists most cited by the right today "von Mises, Hayek and Rand" to recognize that the only thing they thought the poor deserved was contempt.

The Catholic view of the poor is different. As Bishop Ricardo Ramirez told President Obama when he joined other religious leaders to discuss the budget negotiations, "The poor don't have a powerful lobbyist, but they have the most powerful moral claim." Indeed, it is impossible to read the Gospels and not recognize the force of the moral claim of the poor upon the rest of society. As Pope Benedict indicated in his encyclical Caritas in Veritate, the poor are not only to be seen as a burden on society but to be seen as teachers of society, for it is the poor who are closest to God. I do not think the Church "accepts" poverty but it does accept the poor and makes their well-being the criterion by which all our social and economic policies.

I hope that the Knights will take Archbishop Gomez's words to heart. I hope that their effort to help the bishops promote just and comprehensive immigration reform will extend to every council, to the pages of their magazine, to their rallies and their meetings. I hope that the leadership of the Knights will help the members to see that a society that welcomes to immigrants and treats them with dignity is a society that is more likely to welcome the unborn and respect their dignity, and not only because Latinos are overwhelmingly pro-life. We are all called to conversion, and the Knights can help convert that demographic of white, working class ethnic voters away from a politics of resentment that spurns the moral claims of immigrants and the poor, and embrace the Church's culture of life more fully by affirming the dignity of immigrants, a dignity that transcends any legal status. Archbishop Gomez has pointed the way.

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- [1] <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/immigration-and-the-next-america-perspectives-from-our-history/>
- [2] <http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/general/129th-knights-of-columbus-convention-archbishop-jose-gomez-on->

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