

Cardinal says America must understand its immigrant past and future

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 19, 2012

Immigration and the Church

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Cardinal Roger M. Mahony in 2010 (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

WASHINGTON -- In a major talk on immigration reform Friday, Cardinal Roger E. Mahony urged listeners: "Understand our immigrant history and our immigrant future. If we don't understand the past and the present, in the future we're going to proceed in peril."

"The future economic growth of our country requires immigration participation," he said.

Mahony, recently retired archbishop of Los Angeles and long a leading advocate of just immigration reform, addressed a select, invitation-only dinner audience of about 200 Catholic academic, church, government, labor, media and other leaders gathered for the Catholic University of America's annual Dean Hoge Memorial Lecture.

Mahony said to "value our immigrants" and get to know them by "meeting personally with immigrant co-workers."

Current U.S. immigration policy is completely "out of whack," he said, and "Congress has not devised a modern system" that even begins to solve the problem.

Mahony began the Friday talk by stressing Scripture's mandates to all Jews and Christians to welcome the migrant or stranger in their midst as an equal, with hospitality, kindness and justice, arguing that justice for immigrants has to be a fundamental religious commitment for any American who claims to be a disciple of Christ.

The first migrants, he noted, were Adam and Eve. He also mentioned other notable immigrants in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the Israelites fleeing from slavery in Egypt, and Mary and Joseph with the child Jesus who first fled to Egypt and later returned to their homeland -- but to Nazareth, not their original hometown.

He quoted the instruction in Leviticus, "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you," and the parable Jesus presents of the final judgment in Matthew's Gospel, when God says to those being welcomed into heaven, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

U.S. history is one long lesson in immigration, Mahony said, since, apart from the country's Native Americans, "everybody else came from somewhere else."

He summarized the three great waves of American immigration: about 450,000 between 1700 and the American Revolution; millions more between 1820 with a depression in the early 1870s; and from 1881 to 1921, when about 23 million people, or about 4.5 million a year, entered America.

Mahony noted that in the growth of the United States after the country's independence, "the first push-back" against immigration came in the 1850s from the American Party, or Know-Nothings, who feared especially the large immigration of Catholics as a threat to the country's overwhelmingly Protestant culture at that time.

The growth of current anti-immigration sentiment in the country can be traced especially to the Great Recession, which economists say began in 2008 under the administration of President George W. Bush and technically ended the next year, though recovery since 2009 has been slow and sporadic.

"It is always in an economic downturn that we become anti-immigration," Mahony said. "This happens every [negative economic] cycle."

In a follow-up interview with *NCR* and *El Pregonero*, the Spanish-language Catholic newspaper in the Washington Archdiocese, Mahony said he has little hope that just immigration reform will occur in the near future, given the current Democratic-Republican impasse in Washington on virtually everything.

He said that is why he and the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services agency have begun to work with Catholic colleges and universities across the nation to raise awareness of immigration issues, advocacy and action on behalf of immigrants on those campuses.

He said he hopes in the next generation, the country can move past economic cycles in generating popular understanding of and support for serious immigration reform, he said.

"We need these immigrants, we use these immigrants," he said in the interview. "It's simply immoral to treat them without dignity and respect."

The 12 million currently unemployed Americans "aren't going to the farms to get jobs" that millions of documented or undocumented foreigners are performing to bring food to American tables, he said.

In his home state of California, "the state would come to an absolute standstill" if all undocumented non-citizens were to be deported tomorrow, he said.

In the interview, he also called the proposed federal Dream Act, which would grant a path to earned citizenship to any adult who was brought as a child to the United States and who has graduated from college and fulfilled other conditions, a "no-brainer."

Versions of the act have been enacted by a number of states, "but the states can't give legal residency" to children of non-citizens who were born abroad, even though they grew up in this country, he said. "Only the federal government can do that."

He said he can't comprehend why Congress failed to enact the Dream Act as law.

"I'm hoping if the president is re-elected, one of the first things he will do is" to press Congress to adopt the Dream Act, he added.

In his talk, Mahony said many of the "11 million undocumented [currently living and working in the United States] need to be brought out of the shadows" and provided with a path to legalization.

"The future economic growth of our country requires immigrant participation," he said, and current policies and public attitudes are hindering that forward-looking vision.

"We all move forward together, or we all stand still," he said.

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