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Cardinal: Welcome immigrants based on Gospel mandate

by R.W. Dellinger by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

ANAHEIM, Calif. -- In a wide-ranging presentation Saturday at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony said one has to go no further than the 25th chapter of Matthew to find this sacred mandate: "For I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

"All of us as disciples of the Lord are really called by Jesus to look at the strangers in our midst as looking at the face of Jesus," said the retired archbishop of Los Angeles in his talk titled "Surprise: We All Employ Undocumented Workers."

Since retiring last year as archbishop of Los Angeles, Mahony has devoted himself to advancing the cause of comprehensive immigration reform in the nation. Specifically, he has headed an effort to organize Catholic college students, as well as college presidents, around the biblical and moral principles that are the foundation for the church's ongoing support for immigration reform.

The cardinal said Adam and Eve were actually the first migrants in recorded history, noting also that Moses led his imprisoned Jewish people out of Egypt to the Promised Land and Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to protect the life of their newborn son.

During his PowerPoint presentation, Mahony also went through the major historical waves of immigrants to the U.S., from the pilgrims in England fleeing religious persecution to today's Hispanics seeking a better economic life. In addition, he spoke about the different backlash movements against immigrants, starting with the Know Nothing Party of the 1850s up to today's border-guarding militiamen.

"The so-called 'flood of immigrants' has always alarmed some native-born Americans," he said. "Some

feared job competition from foreigners. Others disliked the religion or politics of the newcomers. Has anyone heard that recently? We're still hearing the same thing today."

Mahony said the United States as a nation has been sending "two clear messages at the same time: 'no trespassing' and 'help wanted'; 'no, we don't want you here' and 'yes, we need you.' So that's created a big, big problem now and especially for the future."

He said 10,000 baby boomers are turning 65 every day for the next 19 years, and baby boomers are having 40 percent fewer children than previous generations. "So there isn't a replacement workforce for them," he said. "And, secondly, who's going to take care of them?"

The answer to these demographic quandaries is obvious, the cardinal said. Immigrants will be needed to fill the growing void in skilled as well as unskilled labor. And the church -- as it has so many times in the past -- has a vital role to play in helping these newcomers assimilate to their new nation.

"So as disciples of Jesus Christ, though we are a people of hope, we don't rely on the guys in Congress," Mahony said. "We go forward as hope-filled people, trusting in God's providence for the family of God. We need to end polarization, embracing the new opportunities across generations and groups.

"And I think we in the church have a great opportunity to be a civil voice in this discussion," he added. "We don't yell and scream and use all these generalities: 'Those illegals. ...' It's really important for us to take that role seriously. So we come back to where we started: 'For I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'"

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