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Congressman: On immigration reform, Catholics need pulpit speak

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 25, 2013 NCR Today

The coalition of Catholic leaders pushing for immigration reform -- a triumvirate of the nation's bishops, nuns and university presidents -- need to address the matter from the pulpit to help get reform passed in Congress, a Catholic member of the House judiciary committee said Thursday.

"Everyone takes notice when their priest speaks to them, when their nun speaks to them," said Democratic Congressman Joe Garcia of Florida. "It has impact and it tends to deflate these phony arguments about the fear of the stranger, the fear of the traveler, and this fear of the outsider."

Garcia, a freshman member of the House of Representatives who serves on the chamber's judiciary committee and its subcommittee on immigration policy and border security, made the comments in a phone interview with *NCR* while heading to a vote on the House floor.

Members of the House have been debating for weeks whether they will adopt reforms of the nation's immigration system following passage of such reforms by a wide majority in the Senate June 27. Catholics have taken a front seat in lobbying for passage of reform.

The Catholic lobbying group NETWORK sponsored a 15-state, 40-city Nuns on the Bus tour May 28 to June 18 to lobby members of Congress in their districts. Several bishops have addressed the matter publicly, with Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on migration, saying in June that Americans are "witness[ing] the human consequences of a broken immigration system."

Last week, leaders of more than a third of the nation's 244 Catholic colleges said in a letter [1] to Catholic members of Congress that the country's current treatment of immigrants is "morally indefensible."

A son of immigrants, Garcia's parents emigrated from Cuba in the 1960s following the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro.

He is a past president of the Cuban American National Foundation. Before being elected to Congress to represent part of Florida's Miami-Dade County, he served as director of the Office of Minority Economic Impact for the Department of Energy in the Obama administration.

The Senate immigration reform bill would expand provisions for approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants under a so-called "pathway to citizenship" as long as a series of new measures for security on the U.S.-Mexico border, including addition of some 40,000 Border Patrol agents, are first arranged.

As negotiations on the Senate bill have continued in the House, several Republican House members have said publicly the pathway is a key point of contention. In one of the more blunt statements on the matter, Republican Congressman Steve King of Iowa, also a member of the House Judiciary Committee and a Catholic, said in interviews July 19 that Americans "do not have a moral obligation to solve the problem of the 11 million people that are here unlawfully."

Following is *NCR*'s unedited conversation with Garcia.

***NCR*: Catholic bishops, nuns and university presidents have been lobbying together for comprehensive immigration reform. Obviously, they're all hoping the House will take up the Senate bill. What's going on right now?**

Garcia: They've twisted themselves in a knot on the Republican side. They first barred any chances of the Senate version here because they would never take it. And, of course, the Senate version is no perfect vehicle, but it may be the only vehicle at some point. And we've got several caucuses here who have agreed to introduce it and bring a lot of votes when it comes.

We're giving them every chance to work this out. It is what Speaker [John] Boehner asked us to do. My hope is that they will be able to find the better angels in their nature and do the right thing, do the American thing. But, if not, we're going to have to keep pressing them.

It's not a good place, where they're at. They've passed every enforcement, every aggressive part of the bill -- every sanction part of the bill. What they won't do is find a pathway forward for the 11 million, and that is a principal reason that you engage in this.

You've obviously got a very engaging personal story yourself. On the issue of the pathway or on the issue of welcoming immigrants, how do you see that from a moral perspective?

I think it was Jeane Kirkpatrick [a Reagan-era U.S. ambassador to the UN] who once said this to me. She said, "I once was going to do a history on immigrants and I realized that the history of America was the history of immigrants."

The reality is that I come from two parents who were Cuban refugees -- arrived here at very early, very young ages, dated while they were teenagers in Cuba, married as soon as they got here, and I soon followed. And I was born here. I saw my grandfather come to this country in his late 50s and work as a lawn man, and I worked with him. And there's nothing that teaches humility better than that type of work.

It's an understanding that the opportunity of America is precisely to allow folks to come in, legally, and make their way forward. In my community, fortunately, the laws favor legal immigration and exile and so there is no shame to it. It is the history of my community, and it's a great community. I'm a believer that what we have to do is find a pathway.

What we know is that immigrants provide an economic engine. They do work. The other day, I was debating a Republican friend and he said, "Joe, if someone broke into your house, don't you think they should be punished?"

And I said, "Well, it depends. If someone breaks into my house and what they were breaking in to do was to take care of my ailing mother, bring my kids home from school, fill my refrigerator with fresh fruit and vegetables, paint the walls, and then head outside and cut the grass -- Hell, if they broke into my house, I think I'd still owe them money."

The reality is that this debate has sunk to very low places. The things that Steve King said the other day were reprehensible. But hopefully it is when stark, uncouth things are said that men and women of good conscience take a stand. And my hope is that I have many colleagues on the other side who I admire greatly who I know are right on this issue but are scared.

Those are the true judges of character -- when things are difficult. Most other decisions are relatively easy, but they're difficult in certain districts of this country.

For us Catholics, we've got bishops, nuns and a lot of other people aligning to push on this. That's a little unusual these days. From where you're sitting on the judiciary committee, what do they need to do most?

I think they should speak from the pulpit. I've not always agreed with my pastor when he speaks from the pulpit. I'm Jesuit-trained and I go to a wonderful church. Our church is kind of unique in the fact that a huge percentage of our parishioners -- I spend a great deal of time on Miami Beach, so a lot of our parishioners are just passing through.

But everyone takes notice when their priest speaks to them, when their nun speaks to them. It has impact and it tends to deflate these phony arguments about the fear of the stranger, the fear of the traveler, and this fear of the outsider.

Something the bishops have said is they have a concern about the creation of an underclass in American society. Is that how you see it too?

Absolutely. We already have it. And I think we need to fix this. This idea of giving them legal status but not giving them a path forward -- here's what we know: A huge percentage of them will never choose to be citizens because they're too old, they're not going to take any tests, they can't learn some of the things that we're going to require. But they should have that option. It makes all the sense in the world.

And, by the way, this community, for Catholics -- there's no community that has saved the Catholic church in America more than this new generation of Americans. They have filled our once-empty urban core cities, they have filled the pews, and they've made a difference.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is **jmcelwee@ncronline.org**. Follow him on Twitter: **@joshjmac** **[2]**.]

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