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Bishops at the Border

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Distinctly Catholic

At the end of this month, the USCCB Committee on Migration will hold its annual March meeting, but not at the USCCB headquarters here in Washington. Instead, the committee will travel to the U.S.-Mexican border, make a tour, and say Mass at the border itself. They hope to raise awareness of the human suffering that occurs as a direct result of our broken immigration system. I admit I like the fact the bishops are doing this in part because I suggested they do this several months ago.

This time last year, I had to fly to Quebec to give a talk at Laval University. I breezed through Customs on the way up and breezed through Customs on the way back. At no point did I feel that my life was threatened. At no point did I experience any hardship beyond confronting the limited dining options at Newark International Airport on the way back. For me, crossing the border means an extra line, a little more time, a bit, a little, little bit of bother.

Sadly, for many migrants, crossing the border is a life-threatening experience. Thousands have died at the U.S.-Mexican border. It is true, they are crossing that border without legal permission but they are crossing that border for a more important reason than I had last year. I was giving a talk, a fine talk I think, but a talk nonetheless. The people who risk their lives trying to cross into the United States come trying to find a way to feed their family, or seeking to escape the violence that plagues their country because we Americans just have to have our dope. They come because they believe what I increasingly have a hard time believing, that America is still a land of opportunity.

They encounter danger during their trip for a simple reason: Our immigration system is broken.

There are many reasons to fix our broken immigration system and many of these reasons should resonate especially with U.S. Catholics. Families often contain members with different legal status ? love does not recognize a border ? and our current system separates wives from their husbands and parents from their

children. There is the long immigrant history of the Church in this country. That immigrant history includes our Protestant brothers and sisters but, of course, once they got here, they pretended it was theirs all along and made us Catholics feel like the interlopers. There are the countless, repeated indignities that are perpetrated on the undocumented, the lower or stolen wages, the need to hide in the shadows, the denial of the right to participate in the governance of one's community. And, perhaps most urgently for a Church that has been at the vanguard of the pro-life movement these many years, there are the dead.

When Pope Francis went to the Italian island of Lampedusa last year, his first trip outside Rome since his election as pope, he did so after several dozens of people were killed trying to land their boat at Lampedusa and gain entrance into Europe. The pope got into a boat and threw a wreath of flowers into the water in honor of those who perished. He chastised the world for its indifference to the suffering of the immigrants and called on us Catholics to build a culture of encounter in which indifference is without status, not immigrants.

Our bishops are following the Holy Father's lead and they are to be commended for it. Here is a link to a splendid essay by Hosffman Ospino, a brilliant young Latino theologian at Boston College, in which he reflected on the Lampedusa theme and how what the Holy Father said there last year applies with even greater force to our border this year. I encourage everyone to read Ospino's essay, which was published by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good.

I also encourage everyone to think about the political situation in our country today. A comprehensive immigration bill has passed the Senate by an overwhelming majority. I wish the bill had been less punitive to the undocumented, but it represents a vast improvement over the status quo. We all know that there are sufficient votes in the House of Representatives to pass the Senate bill tomorrow. The problem? The arch-conservatives in the GOP caucus have put pressure on Speaker John Boehner not to bring the bill up for a vote. I ask these arch-conservatives: when did helping keep families together cease to be a concern of yours? When did you become indifferent to the loss of human life? When did history stop mattering to you?

Mr. Boehner is, by all accounts, a man who takes his faith seriously. Here is his chance to prove it. He may not view the plight of immigrants in the terms of social justice with which I view their plight, but surely he can make the pro-family and pro-life argument that his colleagues need to hear. Surely, too, the political calendar is now such that no one can fear a primary challenge if they vote for immigration reform. Why, then, has the bill not been put to a vote. The reason, the truly ugly reason, is that the Republicans do not want to give President Obama a victory. This is gamesmanship, except people's lives are at stake in this horrific game. The culture of indifference to human suffering has subsumed human decency and, combined with political calculation, we have as yet no reason to believe that this much-needed legislation will be brought to a vote.

We may not have a reason to hope, but we hope nonetheless because it is who we are as Christians. And we pray. Our bishops are going to "Our Lampedusa" and while most of us can't make the trip, we can all go to Mass that day and pray in solidarity with our bishops, pray for an end to the suffering that plagues our border.

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