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Hundreds gather to press for immigration reform

Vinnie Rotondaro | Jul. 10, 2014
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Nearly a month after immigration reform in the U.S. was labeled politically dead, a group of Catholic organizations met in the national's capital with the aim of reviving what church leaders continue to see as an urgent humanitarian issue.

"We know the odds are stacked against us on our journey towards a more fair and just immigration system," Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, said in remarks opening the July 7-10 National Migration Conference.

"We've read the pundits who say that recent electoral outcomes means that comprehensive reform will have to wait till 2017 at the earliest. But all you have to do is turn on the nightly news and see pictures of 7-year-old children sharing cots and blankets in refugee facilities on our southern border to know that this issue remains essential, and our efforts cannot wait."

Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, president of the global Catholic charity Caritas Internationalis, set the tone for the conference by speaking to the question of immigration at the global level. "In the Western Hemisphere," he said, "the church's role as a defender of migrants and refugees is more important than ever."

"The statistics are alarming. What we are finding is that as economic migration in our hemisphere has slowed somewhat, migration fleeing violence and persecution is on the increase, particularly from Central America to the United States.

"And what are we doing to help these migrants?" the cardinal continued. "While the Italian navy is dredging up bodies from the Mediterranean and thousands are dying in the sands of the desert between Mexico and the U.S. and in the Sahara, many people are burying their heads in the sand."

The last National Migration Conference was held in 2008. The 2014 conference drew hundreds of participants, including a number of American cardinals and bishops, such as Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle.

The conference was hosted by the Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., and Catholic Charities USA. There were more than 40 workshops on topics relating to immigrant legal services, resettlement, policy and advocacy, anti-trafficking, and children's services, among others.

Political controversy continued to surround the issue of immigration at the national level as the conference took place. On July 8, President Barack Obama urged Congress to provide nearly $4 billion to address an influx of young migrants from Central America crossing the U.S. southern border, an issue the president called "an urgent humanitarian situation."

But the request for funds quickly fell prey to political gridlock, with Republican lawmakers not wanting to give a "blank check" to address an issue they say he has not done enough to address in the past ? namely, securing the border.

Obama also received strong pushback from some Democrats and immigrant rights groups, who expressed misgivings about administration plans to change existing laws in order to speed up deportations of unaccompanied minors who show up at the border. The president has since backed off making any changes.

Prior to the conference, Elizondo, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration, issued a statement saying that the Catholic community would "continue to push," lawmakers to pass comprehensive reform this year, although it remains unclear if the U.S. Catholic leadership has any concrete plans to do so.

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