

Immigration, national identity and Catholic conscience

A Lecture by
The Most Reverend José H. Gomez, D.D.
Archbishop of Los Angeles

Boston College
Sponsored by The Church in the 21st Century
September 8, 2016

Dear Friends,

It's great to be with you tonight. Thank you. I am honored by the invitation to speak about this topic. It is close to my heart and my ministry.

Immigration reform is one of the great issues of our day. It's about more than politics and economics. It is a struggle for justice, dignity and human rights. It is a challenge to the conscience of every individual. In many ways, I believe immigration reform is a spiritual issue — it is a test of our faith, our humanity and our compassion. And the questions it raises go to the heart of America's national identity and purpose in the world.

Those are some of the things I want to reflect on tonight. I have to begin with a short disclaimer. I am not a politician. I am a pastor.

For me immigration is about people — people I work with and live with; my neighbors and parishioners; my friends and family. It is also something personal for me. I came to this country as an immigrant from Mexico and I am a naturalized citizen for more than 20 years now. I have family and friends on both sides of the border.

So I don't come tonight to talk about the elections or the candidates or the politics of immigration. I do have to say: I am disturbed by the “drift” of our national conversation and the failed state of American immigration policy. For more than a decade now — Congress, the President, state and local governments, the courts — they have all failed in their responsibilities to address this issue. They blame cuts across party lines. And sadly, we don't have too many examples of moral leadership or political courage that we can point to.

The result is that we have in our country right now a humanitarian tragedy that is affecting millions of men, women and children. So tonight, I want to offer some reflections that I think might help us move forward on this issue. I do not pretend to have a “program” or be offering a legislative solution. I want to focus our attention on three areas — the humanity of our immigrant brothers and sisters; the history, identity and promise of America; and the need for more mercy and understanding in our approach to the issues. So let's begin.

The human face of immigration

Last Sunday, we had the joy in the universal Church to celebrate the canonization of Mother Teresa. And I have been thinking about something that St. Mother Teresa used to say. She used to say: everybody talks *about* the poor, but nobody talks *to* the poor. I think that's a real problem right now in how our nation has been approaching the immigration issue.

Sometimes I wonder how many of us — especially how many of our politicians and media figures — how many have actually had a conversation with an undocumented person? Just a normal conversation. Sometimes in our public debates when we talk “about” them — we are talking about them in the abstract. We describe how immigrants are a threat to our jobs or our wages or way of life. How they are a burden on our social services.

Those are important considerations. But it’s also important to remember that behind every “statistic” is a soul — a soul who has dignity as a child of God, a soul who has rights and needs that are both spiritual and material.

Earlier this year I had the privilege to be in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across the Texas border to celebrate Mass with Pope Francis. It was inspiring to see his own personal contact, his friendship and compassion for the migrant, for the refugee.

I also had the privilege to be in Washington, D.C. last September when Pope Francis addressed the U.S. Congress. And he reminded us that he himself is the son of an immigrant. And Pope Francis said something beautiful that I think we should all reflect on:

“On this continent...thousands of persons are led to travel north in search of a better life for themselves and for their loved ones, in search of greater opportunities. Is this not what we want for our own children? We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation. To respond in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal.”

That’s the perspective that is missing in our national debates. We are overwhelmed by the “numbers” of immigrants in our midst. But they are more than “numbers” or mouths to feed. They are our brothers and sisters and they have faces and names and families and stories — just like every one of us.

When you really talk to them and when you listen to their stories — it can make your heart ache. Often their journey to this country has been hard and they have suffered poverty, exploitation and sorrows we can never know. Many have been forced to leave behind loved ones — parents, spouses, children — that they may never see again.

The immigrants I know are people who have faith in God, who love their families, and who aren’t afraid of hard work and sacrifice. Most have come to this country for the same reasons that immigrants have always come to this country — to seek refuge from violence and poverty; to make a better life for their children. Just as the pope said.

A nation of immigrants

That brings me to my next point. American history and national identity. It is common to talk about America as “a nation of immigrants.” That was the title of a good book that John F. Kennedy wrote when he was a Senator here in Massachusetts. And this is true. With the exception of our indigenous brothers and sisters, almost every American is the son or daughter of someone who came to this country from somewhere

else. Sadly, this includes those who were brought here from West Africa against their will in the evil of human slavery.

But I am concerned that along the way we have lost some important chapters in our history. I realize that we are only about 50 miles or so from Plymouth Rock, which is kind of “Ground Zero” for American history. As we all know, in the standard narratives, the history of our country begins there in the 1600s with the pilgrims and the Mayflower. But my friends, I want to suggest, that with all due respect to the pilgrims — they got to this country about a hundred years late!

The truth is that long before Plymouth Rock, long before George Washington and the 13 colonies; long before this country even had a name — there were missionaries and explorers here from Spain and Mexico and they were settling the territories of what are now Florida, Texas, California and New Mexico. The first Asians, from the Philippines, started arriving in California — about 50 years before the pilgrims got to Plymouth Rock.

Something we should think about: the first non-indigenous language spoken in this country was not English. It was Spanish. We don’t have enough time tonight to talk about all this. I find it fascinating to study the Hispanic and Catholic roots of America. If you are interested in this topic, you can check out the little book I wrote a few years back called, “Immigration and the Next America.” My point tonight is that we need to recover this “forgotten” history.

Every people has a story they tell about their beginnings. A story about where they came from and how they got here. This “story of origins” helps them make sense of who they are as a people. Right now, the story we tell about America starts here on the East Coast — New York, Jamestown, Boston, Philadelphia. We remember the first Thanksgiving, the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War.

That story is not wrong. It’s just not complete. And because it’s not complete, it gives the distorted impression that America was founded as a project only of Western Europeans. It makes us assume that only immigrants from those countries really “belong” and can claim to be called “Americans.”

This misreading of history has obvious implications for our current debates. We hear warnings all the time from politicians and the media — that immigration from Mexico and Latin America is somehow changing our American “identity” and “character.”

I hear these arguments and I think — what American identity are we talking about?

There has been an Hispanic presence and influence in this country from the beginning, since about 40 years after Columbus. As a matter of fact, did you know that today is Thanksgiving? Again, with due respect to the Pilgrims, the first Thanksgiving was actually celebrated on this date — the Nativity of the Blessed Mother, in 1565, by Hispanics in St. Augustine, Florida. You can read about that in my book.

America’s newest saint, St. Junípero Serra, was canonized last year in Washington, D.C. by Pope Francis. He was a Latino, an immigrant from Mexico. But most people don’t know that he wrote a bill of rights for the indigenous peoples in California — *three years before the Declaration of Independence*.

These facts should be part of our American story. And my friends, if we really took these facts seriously, we would have a much richer, much deeper understanding of American identity and American character — of what it means to be an American, of who is an American, and of what kind of country we are meant to be.

Mercy and the vision of America

America's founders dreamed of a nation where people from every race, religion and ethnic background could live in equality — as brothers and sisters, children of the same God. Their beautiful vision helped make this country grow as a generous and welcoming nation — a beacon for the persecuted and the poor; a flourishing diversity of cultures, religions and ways of life.

But it is also true that at various points in American history, our faith and commitment to this original vision has been shaken. There is a streak of nativism and racial discrimination that has always run through our history. It seems to flare up especially in times when people are fearful and uncertain about the future. I think we are in one of those periods in our history again today.

Many of our neighbors today are worried and anxious. They are worried about what the global economy means for their jobs, their wages; they are worried about the threat of terrorism. They worry that our communities are fracturing and our culture is breaking down. And many have come to focus on the 11 million undocumented people living within our borders as a kind of symbol for everything they are anxious about.

Now as a pastor, I think our neighbors' fears are real and I think we need to take them seriously. But also as a pastor, I have to say that I'm worried about something else that I see. I'm worried that in our fear, we are closing in on ourselves, we are hardening our hearts. There is a cruelty in our policies and our public rhetoric.

That brings me to my third point, mercy. I am worried that we are losing our sense of mercy, our ability to show forgiveness and kindness, to empathize and feel the pain of others. Since 2008, we have deported more than 2 million undocumented persons. Most are not violent criminals. In fact, up to one-quarter are mothers and fathers that our government is seizing from ordinary households.

That's the sad truth about immigration policy in America today. Our system has been broken for so long, our politicians have failed to act for so long — that the people we are now punishing have become our neighbors. Most of the 11 million undocumented people in the U.S. have been living here for five years or more. Two-thirds have been here for at least a decade. Almost half are living in homes with a spouse and children.

So think about what that means when we talk about deportations. It means that in the name of enforcing our laws, we are taking away some little girl's dad, some little boy's mom. We're breaking up families and punishing kids for the mistakes of their parents. And again, remember, we are not talking about violent criminals. We are talking about ordinary working people.

There has been some improvement in the last year or so. The government is trying to pay more attention to keep families together. But still our whole policy in the United States right now is focused on deportation and punishing those who are within our borders without proper papers. We have made these 11 million the focus of all our anger and fear about our broken immigration system. There is something wrong with that. We are a better people than that. The truth is that for almost 20 years, our government was not enforcing our immigration laws. Part of that was because American businesses were demanding “cheap” labor from other countries.

It’s also true that all of us, to some extent, have been “benefitting” every day from an economy built on undocumented labor. They are the people who take care of our children. They are working on our landscapes and cleaning our offices. They are building our homes and waiting on tables in our restaurants; they are harvesting the food we eat.

When we think about our broken immigration system, there is plenty of blame to go around. But we aren’t punishing ourselves, or the businesses who hired undocumented workers, or the government officials who looked the other way. Instead we are punishing the voiceless and most vulnerable — ordinary parents who came here seeking a better life for their children. We are making them the scapegoats for our failures as a society. That’s not right.

The politicians and the media figures say the undocumented should go back to their home countries and “get in line” to re-enter this country legally. That sounds reasonable and fair. The reality is that it can take more than 10 years to get into this country legally because our immigration system is so broken and backward. The “waiting lists” are even longer for people who want to come from most Latin American countries. So in effect, we’re asking people to make an almost inhuman choice. We’re asking them to separate themselves from their children, their loved ones — for maybe a decade or more.

Is that the kind of justice we want? We need to put ourselves in the position of these people. What would we do if we were faced with that kind of a choice? Would we follow a law, if it means maybe never seeing our families again? Again, if you talk to these people it will break your heart. Can you imagine what it’s like to live in the shadows of our society in a kind of “perpetual limbo,” year after year without full rights in the workplace, without the ability to plan for your future?

Can you imagine the stress — the constant uncertainty, the fear that one day without warning you won’t be coming home for dinner and you may never see your family again? That’s what it means to be undocumented in America. That’s the human face of our immigration policy today.

And when you look into the eyes of a child who’s father has been deported — and I have done that — we realize how inadequate our politics are.

The way forward

I have tried to make three points. First, that we need to recover our sense of the humanity of the immigrants within our borders. Second, that we need to remember that Hispanics and Asians were a part of the original ethnic fabric of America and they “belong” here as much as anyone else. And finally, I have argued that we need more mercy in our approach to the challenges of undocumented immigrants.

Let me conclude by suggesting some directions for moving forward. The first is obvious, but we need to restate it. People do not cease to be our brothers and sisters just because they have an irregular immigration status. No matter how they got here, no matter how frustrated we are with our government, we cannot lose sight of their humanity — without losing our own.

So we need to resist the temptations to nativism and discrimination. And we need to insist on public discourse and public policy that reflects our common humanity and promotes the dignity of the human person. The good news is that the American people are far more compassionate and understanding than some of the loudest voices we are hearing today.

There is a broad consensus that our nation has the obligation to secure its borders and determine who enters the country and how long they stay. There is also broad agreement that we need to update our immigration system to enable us to welcome newcomers who have the character and skills our country needs to grow. There is even broad consensus on how to deal with the undocumented persons living among us.

A Marist poll commissioned last year by the Knights of Columbus found overwhelming support for granting them a generous path to citizenship, provided they meet certain requirements such as learning English, paying some fines and holding a job that pays taxes. So we have a consensus in public opinion for immigration reforms that would be meaningful, just and merciful. What we are waiting for is politicians and media figures who have the will and the courage to lead.

So what about us, as ordinary Americans? I think we have a duty to be the keepers of the American vision — the vision of a nation conceived under God and committed to human dignity, freedom and the flourishing of diverse peoples, races and beliefs.

My friends, I still believe in this founding vision of America. I know you do too. And millions of our neighbors do also. On a human level, I think it's important for us to get to know our immigrant brothers and sisters, documented or undocumented. We need to find ways to accompany them and to help them. Finally, I think all of us need to try to grow in empathy and mercy, by the grace of God. We need to deepen our bonds of friendship and mutual aid. We need to be working for a new America in which no one is a stranger. An America in which we encounter the "other" — as a brother, as a sister. As one who is like us — a child created in the image and likeness of God. Thank you for listening this evening.