



## Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops

THE PUBLIC POLICY VOICE OF THE CHURCH

### Senate Bill 4 Written Testimony of Michael Barba Associate Director of Public Policy

My name is Michael Barba and I am testifying today on behalf of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops. As Bishop Joe Vasquez stated emphatically, we oppose Senate Bill 4. I add to his testimony several alternatives, recommended by the bishops, which would significantly improve our immigration system.<sup>1</sup> It would serve the people of Texas to examine how our laws can advance these goals.

*Earned Legalization:* George Washington maintained the view that the United States should ever be “an asylum to the oppressed and the needy of the earth.” To achieve this in our current circumstances, we advocate for an earned legalization program that would allow foreign nationals of good moral character who are living in the United States to obtain lawful permanent residence. Such a program would require applicants to complete and pass background checks, pay a fine, and establish eligibility for resident status.

*Work Program:* A program to permit foreign workers to enter the country safely and legally would help reduce illegal immigration and the loss of life in the American desert. Any program should include workplace protections, living wage levels, safeguards against the displacement of U.S. workers, and family unity.

*Address Root Causes:* We should examine the cause of migration from Central and South America and seek long-term solutions. The solution to the problem of illegal immigration is political and economic stability. The sources of instability ought to be identified and mitigated.

*Enforcement:* The Bishops accept the legitimate role of the government in intercepting unauthorized migrants who attempt to travel to the U.S.. The Bishops also believe that by reforming lawful means for migrants to enter, live, and work in the United States, law enforcement will be better able to focus upon threats to public safety from drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and terrorists.

Background. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, there are currently 11.2 million unauthorized persons residing in the United States. Each year, approximately 300,000 more unauthorized immigrants enter the country. In large part, these immigrants feel compelled to enter by either the explicit or implicit promise of employment in the U.S. agriculture, construction, and service industries, among others. Most of this unauthorized flow comes from Mexico, a nation struggling with severe poverty, where it is often impossible for many to earn a living wage and meet the basic needs of their families.

Survival has thus become the primary impetus for unauthorized immigration flows into the United States. Today’s unauthorized immigrants are largely low-skilled workers who come to the United States for work to support their families. Over the past several decades, the demand by U.S. businesses, large and small, for low-skilled workers has grown exponentially, while the supply of available workers for low-skilled jobs has diminished. Yet, there are only 5,000 green cards available annually for low-skilled workers to

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<sup>1</sup> See [The Catholic Church’s Position on Immigration Reform](#), August 2013

enter the United States lawfully to reside and work. The only alternative to this is a temporary work visa through the H-2A (seasonal agricultural) or H2B (seasonal non-agricultural) visa programs which provide temporary status to low-skilled workers seeking to enter the country lawfully. While H-2A visas are not numerically capped, the requirements are onerous. H-2B visas are capped at 66,000 annually. Both only provide temporary status to work for a U.S. employer for one year. At their current numbers, these are woefully insufficient to provide legal means for the foreign-born to enter the United States to live and work, and thereby meet our demand for foreign-born labor.

In light of all of this, many unauthorized migrants consider the prospect of being apprehended for crossing illegally into the United States a necessity. Even after being arrested and deported, reports indicate that many immigrants attempt to re-enter the U.S. once again in the hope of bettering their lives.

Adding to this very human dilemma is the potentially dangerous nature of crossing the Southern border. Smugglers looking to take advantage of would-be immigrants extort them for exorbitant sums of money and then transport them to the U.S. under perilous conditions. Other immigrants have opted to access the U.S. by crossing through the Southwest's treacherous deserts. As a result, thousands of migrants have tragically perished in such attempts from heat exposure, dehydration, and drowning.

Catholic Social Teaching. Good government has two duties, both of which must be carried out and neither of which can be ignored. The first duty is to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the human person. Persons have the right to immigrate and thus government must accommodate this right to the greatest extent possible, especially financially blessed nations. The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him.

The second duty is to secure one's border and enforce the law for the sake of the common good. Sovereign nations have the right to enforce their laws and all persons must respect the legitimate exercise of this right. Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens.