

Immigration Reform and the Involvement of Religious Communities
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Separated by a wall of plastic and a stainless steel speaker, I quietly listened to the story of Jose, a detainee originally from Mexico, who after forty years of residing in the United States on an expired visa, was arrested and brought to Monmouth County Jail for committing a petty crime.ⁱⁱ Nine months and twenty five days later he is still waiting for a verdict to be reached: will he be deported or will he stay?

Leaving the jail that day after hearing his story, one thought crossed my mind: there is something tremendously wrong with our immigration system.

In the quest to live the great “American dream,” millions of people from all over the globe journey to the United States every year. And although the United States is a country of immigrants, the issues surrounding immigration policy are both divisive and controversial. In recent years, the number of undocumented immigrants has been dominated by migrants of Latin American origin. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, approximately 78 percent of the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States are Hispanic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Policymakers agree that the United States’ immigration system is a patchwork of policy objectives that is severely lacking a unifying framework. For decades, the U.S. immigration system had three basic policy objectives: to allow family members to reunite with spouses, children, and other close relatives already in the U.S; to provide a refuge for people who are forced to leave their countries of origin because of political, racial, or religious persecution; and to allow entry to workers with specific skills needed to fill labor shortages. The 9/11 terrorist attacks added a fourth policy objective: protecting national security.^{iv}

These objectives, each perfectly valid on its own, are not integrated into a cohesive policy framework, which leads to inefficient and inconsistent outcomes that impact the lives of undocumented immigrants and their families in unjust and inhumane ways.

To date, the public discussions of immigration by the media and political elites generally frame the issue in terms of the economic, security and cultural aspects of reform. Absent from much of this discussion is the moral aspect. Indeed, the lack of comprehensive immigration reform is a social justice issue in which church communities play a large role in advocating for and with undocumented immigrants, giving them a voice that would otherwise not be heard.

Many religious groups and congregations support comprehensive immigration reform because the issue affects them in their particular communities. Historically, this is not new: the modern American world is fundamentally shaped by the religious activism of the 19th and 20th centuries, stemming from injustice witnessed within local communities. Today's immigration policy has devastating effects on the growing Latino population, many of whom are Catholic. In fact, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, 45 percent of Catholics aged 18 to 29 are Hispanic/Latino, compared with 12 percent of Catholics ages 70 and older. As a result, many Catholic communities witness the injustices their parishioners face due to immigration status. In New Jersey and across the United States we see immigrant families living in the same one-room apartments (sharing bathroom and kitchen facilities) with up to four other families. We see children separated for months or years from their families because of raids resulted in the deportation of parents.

In a 2003 joint statement of the Catholic Bishops in the United States and Mexico, the bishops maintained that the church is compelled by Scripture to care for strangers and show love to one's neighbor. They drew upon the writings of Pope Pius XII, affirming the right to migrate, and those of Pope John Paul II, who, writing in reference to the American Catholic church, called upon the church to welcome immigrants, to help them settle and thus enrich society.^v

One of the most vocal Catholic leaders advocating for immigration reform has been Cardinal Roger Mahony of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.^{vi} In 2005, Cardinal Mahony helped establish the Justice for Immigrants Campaign to press Congress to adopt comprehensive, just, humane and compassionate reform.^{vii}

Other religious groups support the Catholic Church's view, especially minority religions who, having historically been subject to both direct and indirect discrimination, feel a "shared marginalization" with undocumented immigrants.^{viii} Jewish groups in particular, such as the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, have consistently taken public stands in support of similar immigration reform measures.

The importance of religious communities in advocating and supporting immigrant rights is crucial to the well-being of many immigrant families. The motivation is highly personal and deeply rooted in the religious values of "loving thy neighbor." It is clear that comprehensive reform is necessary, but what can we do? Thinking back to my conversation with Jose and the hardships he shared, it is clear that one person cannot change the United States immigration system, in one day, or with one story. But with the support and advocacy efforts of religious communities, we are closer to reforming a system of inequality and discrimination – injustices that transcend all borders.

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ⁱⁱ The name of the detainee has been changed to protect his identity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.* ii, Pew Hispanic Center (Mar. 7, 2006), available at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>.

^{iv} Ana Avendaño & Victoria Bruce, *The Labor Movement's Solution to Illegal Immigration*, 39 Social Policy 17-19 (Spring 2009).

^v United States Conference of Catholic Bishops & the Mexican Bishops' Conference *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, at ¶29 (Jan. 22, 2003), available at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml>.

^{vi} See, e.g., Roger Mahoney, *Thank You, Arizona! An Ill-Conceived Law Could Reinvigorate Immigration Reform*, America Vol. 202, No. 19, at 17-19 (June 7-14, 2010); Roger Mahony, *Called by God to Help*, N.Y. Times, Mar. 22, 2006, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/opinion/22mahony.html>.

^{vii} For more information, see <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org>.

^{viii} Benjamin R. Knoll, *And Who Is My Neighbor? Religion and Immigration Policy Attitudes*, 48 Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 313, 322 (June 2009).

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