25 February 2017

Pastoral Message on Immigration

"Then the king will say to those on his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for when I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." (Matthew 25:41-43)

The United States has been functioning with a broken immigration system for decades. This is recognized by many leaders in the agricultural and business world, as well as the social services and human rights sectors. The U.S. economy depends on the labor of undocumented immigrants, the social security system has been supported by contributions from undocumented workers, and undocumented workers have often been exploited by employers and others who know that these workers have little access to justice.

For as long as the immigration system has been broken, most of the solutions proposed have focused exclusively on the enforcement of inadequate laws rather than the comprehensive reform that is needed. The most recent immigration raids following the president's executive orders are the latest attempt at an enforcement-only approach.

Under the guise of removing criminals and "bad people" who threaten public safety, people who lack documentation are facing increased threats of deportation. Many hardworking individuals without criminal records are being held in detention and/or deported. As a result, families are being separated and many good people in our own communities are living in fear. Law enforcement agents are setting up checkpoints across the State of Kentucky.

It is a critical matter of our faith to recognize that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and that we will face final judgment based on the way we treat the most vulnerable.

As people of faith, we are called to open our hearts to our brothers and sisters in need. We recognize that the right to support one's family is a basic human right that sometimes necessitates migration. When migration laws are outdated or not helpful, there is no legal path for the desperate to come to the United States so they resort to overstaying visas or to unauthorized crossing of the border. We should be slow to judge the actions of people who are trying to survive and support a family.

The policies of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) state that they do not target sensitive areas such as churches, schools and hospitals for deportation and removal activities. Our faith communities will need to hold them accountable to these policies. Worship and church activities should be safe places where the immigrant community can gather and participate. Parish or mission communities may consider whether to offer their churches as sanctuaries for those who would face deportation.

Some parish and mission communities have identified members who will take care of children if their parents are deported. Others are helping with financial aid to those who lack the resources for proper legal representation at immigration hearings.

All of us can be engaged in creating a more welcoming environment for immigrants. We can be informed about the threats the immigrant community faces by following updates on www.justiceforimmigrants.org and we can examine our own attitudes towards immigrants in the light of our faith tradition. We can also call for a more compassionate approach to immigrants by contacting the president, congress and local officials. We can voice opposition to the use of local law enforcement for the detention and removal of immigrants.

Focusing exclusively of the enforcement of immigration laws does not fix a broken system. Our nation should not add to human suffering, especially for vulnerable segments of the population. Comprehensive and fair immigration reform is long overdue. Increased deportation is a costly investment in increased suffering, it makes no one safer.

Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv.
Bishop of Lexington