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Pastoral Letter from
the Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, Archbishop of Atlanta,
and the Most Reverend J. Kevin Boland, Bishop of Savannah,
Regarding Immigration Reform

America has always been a country built of many immigrant peoples, who bring with them richness in cultures and diversity from all areas of the world. Our nation has consistently welcomed immigrants, refugees, and exiles fleeing injustice and oppression and seeking liberty and the opportunity to achieve a full life. They have found work, built homes and lives, and provided security for themselves and their families.

During the past 20 years, about 23 million newcomers have arrived in our nation, surpassing the “first great wave” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in terms of the numbers of immigrants arriving in the United States. Unlike their predecessors, most of the current immigrants come from Mexico and Central and Latin America. Today the foreign-born comprise about 12 percent of the total population of the country, compared with 15 percent at the beginning of the 20th century.

At the same time, U.S. immigration laws and policies have become increasingly restrictive and even harmful to some immigrants and those seeking asylum. It is estimated that over 10 million

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people live on the margins of our society for lack of proper immigration documentation. In the last five years alone, more than 250,000 illegal immigrants have arrived in the state of Georgia, bringing their total to nearly 800,000 people or about 9 percent of our state's population.

Today's immigrants often face rejection, hostility, and discrimination in our communities and even within the Church. Though we often celebrate the diversity in our communities, we bishops must confess that today, as in the past, the treatment of the immigrant too often reflects failures of understanding and sinful patterns of chauvinism, prejudice, and discrimination that deny the unity of the human family.

However, one reality remains constant in the current American experience of immigration: The demand for unskilled labor within the U.S. economy and the corresponding entrance of immigrants seeking work in labor-intensive industries, such as agriculture, construction, food processing, and services, have continually attracted large numbers of undocumented immigrants to our country and specifically Georgia.

In the context of this complex issue, we, the Catholic bishops of Georgia, call for comprehensive immigration reform and believe that U.S. immigration policy should not only protect the human rights and dignity of newcomers but also provide a legal and secure means of entry for prospective immigrants and people seeking asylum.

We also acknowledge with concern a growing public sentiment in our country and state, a sentiment that seeks to pass new immigration laws that are restrictive, punitive, and often extreme in nature. Legislation of this nature has been introduced and is presently under debate at both the state and national levels of our government that would restrict health care, education, and basic social services for immigrants, specifically those who are here illegally.

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Immigrants are the strangers for whom God seeks protection. They are people with names and faces, hopes and fears. They are not statistics or “talking points,” but persons who seek a better life through their own hard work and sacrifice. In adopting new legislation, our state legislators must take into account the moral implications and human consequences for all people. Are we going to treat people in our midst with dignity and respect or punish them for where they come from and how they got here?

Catholic social teaching in this area is quite clear and is based on the principles and rights described in the encyclical “Rerum Novarum” (“On the Condition of Labor”) published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 at another time of increased migration to this country. In this document, the pope commented on the situation of migrants, and later Catholic writings in this area from popes and bishops’ conferences have summarized this information into five basic principles related to migration: (1) persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland, (2) persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families, (3) sovereign nations have the right to control their borders, (4) refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection, and (5) the human dignity and human rights of undocumented immigrants should be respected.

To respond to our present immigration situation, a number of Catholic organizations, representing a broad cross-section of the Church in the United States, have joined forces to implement a campaign called “Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope.” This campaign is designed to educate and influence public attitudes toward immigrants and to bring about orderly changes in our nation’s immigration laws and policies.

In the pastoral letter “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” issued jointly by the bishops of Mexico and the United States in 2003, the bishops outlined the elements of

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comprehensive reforms necessary to respond to today's immigration challenges. These reforms include: (1) economic and social development to address root causes that force people to migrate, (2) the development of an earned legalization program for the undocumented in this country, (3) the use of expanded legal means for families to be reunited, (4) a temporary worker program that protects foreign and domestic workers alike, and (5) other reforms in due process access and asylum procedures.

Additionally, we bishops recognize that the conditions that compel people to leave their homes out of desperation and lack of opportunities to provide for themselves and their families must be addressed if an effective and comprehensive response to immigration is to be achieved.

Our country's current immigration laws and policies are at best outdated, unresponsive to today's realities, and even harmful to immigrants and their families, creating an ever-growing marginalized class of residents. Families are separated, sometimes for decades and longer, for lack of visas available for family reunification. And tragically, would-be immigrants are dying in our border regions in desperate attempts to come to this country in order to provide a better life for themselves and their families.

Under our federal Constitution, the U.S. government is given the right to regulate immigration. Any reformation of immigration should be comprehensive and thus should come from the federal government. Additional state regulations should only be considered after the U.S. Congress has acted on the legislation now pending. Rather than approaching the situation in a restrictive and punitive way, our elected officials should support a comprehensive solution to this immigration crisis that looks at all aspects of our immigration system, including our legal immigration system.

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We need realistic immigration reform. We need a bill that is fair, practical, and enforceable, and one that can pass through Congress and become law.

The only bill so far that meets these criteria and has been endorsed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is the “Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act of 2005,” (McCain-Kennedy S. 1033 and H.R. 2330). This bill is comprehensive; it is designed to bring immigrants out of the shadows; shut down the “black market” of smuggling, fake documents, and exploitation; restore the rule of law at our borders, our workplaces, and our communities; and encourage those who settle here to get on the path to citizenship.

As bishops, we advocate that all aspects of our immigration system should be scrutinized and appropriately reformed to reflect the new reality of immigration in an increasingly globalized world. Only by addressing the root causes of immigration, such as economic injustice and conflict, will we create a climate in which immigration is driven by choice and not necessity.

In the Holy Scriptures, we are reminded of our responsibilities to those in need: “Woe to the legislators of infamous laws, to those who issue tyrannical decrees, who refuse justice to the unfortunate and cheat the poor among my people of their rights, who make widows their prey, and rob the orphan.” (Is 10:1-2)

Again, we reiterate our call to the General Assembly, to our Catholic people and to people of good will to speak out in support of that immigration reform legislation which is consistent with the biblical teachings that undergird humane law.

In his message for World Migration Day in 2000, the late Pope John Paul II called on all members of the Church to work “so that every person’s dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family which knows how to

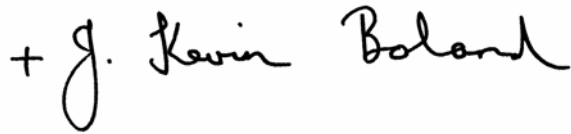
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appreciate with discernment the different cultures which comprise it.” It is in this tradition of welcoming the stranger that we, the Catholic bishops of the state of Georgia, join with people of good will throughout our state and country in calling for comprehensive legislative immigration reform to overcome the misunderstanding, ignorance, competition, and fear that stand in the way of a genuine welcome for the strangers in our midst.



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