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Immigration and faith

U.S. Bishops' spokesman talks in Anchorage

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"The church is compelled to speak out on immigration," a spokesperson for the U.S. bishops told Catholics in Anchorage May 21.

Kevin Appleby is director of migration policy and services for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He was in Anchorage to speak on "Immigration from a Faith Perspective" for Our Lady of Guadalupe's Anchorage Faith and Action — Congregations Together organizing committee.

"There's a big misunderstanding of the church's role in the public sector," Appleby said. "We have every right to be involved in the public square. From the church's perspective, this issue is about human beings, human dignity and frankly, human life."

On Pope Benedict XVI's recent plane trip to the U.S., he said, immigration was one of the main things the pontiff spoke about to the press corps.

"This is a Catholic issue," Appleby said.

Appleby has been in his position for eight years and was involved in pressing for immigration legislation that failed in Congress in 2007. Alaska's senators, Lisa Murkowski and then-Senator Ted Stevens, voted against the legislation backed by the U.S. bishops. Appleby said that legislators must know they have "cover" from constituents back home for voting for immigration reform.

There is no current legislation regarding immigration before Congress.

Appleby said President Obama has a meeting scheduled with leaders of both parties, and that by the fall, there may be legislation supported by both the administration and proponents of immigration reform.

U.S. bishops want to see a system for eventual legalization for the 12 million undocumented immigrants who are presently in the U.S. This "earned citizenship" would entail paying fines and back taxes and working for several years.

The bishops also propose a guest worker program which would guarantee certain workers' rights to all working within the U.S., and a program of family reform which would shorten the waiting time to reunite families.

Appleby stressed that those who vote against reform are ignoring the fact that the present system is not working.

"The best estimate of the number of undocumented workers in this country is about 12 million," he said. "And each year ,300,000 to 500,000 are added to this number."

In response to this influx, the U.S. government has spent \$35 billion since 1994 in border enforcement, with a commitment of almost 18,000 border patrol officers.

But contrast today's number — 12 million — to only 5 million undocumented workers who were present when the program started in 1994. Clearly, said Appleby, the commitment of resources has not slowed the growth of illegal immigration.

And from a standpoint of human dignity and family unity — two of the principles stressed in papal encyclicals touching on immigration — the policy has been a disaster.

"We have what I call a 'nod, nod, blink, blink' policy about immigration," Appleby said. "At the border we say 'keep out,' but at the workplace we say, 'help wanted.'" American employers seek the labor that undocumented workers provide.

Meanwhile, said Appleby, the countries which provide undocumented workers have little incentive to slow emigration. The money emigrants send home to Mexico is that country's third largest source of revenue next to oil and tourism.

The present system is a complete failure, said Appleby, and critics of the bishops' proposals have offered no solutions.

Border walls do not work, he said, and raids on work places separate families. Often, immigrants die in vain attempts to reach the U.S.

Appleby sees hope in the fact that surveys show most Americans favor some kind of immigration reform.

"We're an immigrant church," Appleby said. "Until 1924, people just came here. There was no 'legal' or 'illegal.' People still want the same things they've always wanted, and immigrants still have the same strong work ethic and family-oriented values they've always had."