

Comprehensive immigration reform, not punitive state laws, the right approach to the immigration crisis

**By Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas, Diocese of Tucson,
and Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, Diocese of Phoenix**

January, 2008

A little more than two years ago, we communicated our concerns about the moral dimensions of the immigration crisis in Arizona.

In “You Welcomed Me,” our pastoral letter to Catholics in our dioceses, we stated that the Catholic Church speaks up about immigration because it is committed to the protection of the rights and dignity that all persons are entitled to from conception to natural death.

In that context, we expressed our deep concerns about the tragic deaths of migrants in our desert, the growing fear felt by citizens and non-citizens in our state and the increasingly hateful and hostile rhetoric in our state and nation about immigration.

We stated that such rhetoric is not characteristic of our state and the good people who live here.

We now express our concern that recent state and local actions, such as the state employer sanctions law that just went into effect, are not solutions, but may make matters worse.

For example, there are reports that the law already has resulted in undocumented workers leaving Arizona to return to their home countries or to move to other states.

The economic consequences of a potential mass exodus of undocumented workers could severely harm Arizona’s economy. Undocumented workers make up as much as 12 per cent of the state labor force, working in construction, agriculture and service industries.

The loss of these workers could be devastating. A recent University of Arizona study warned that a 15 per cent loss of that labor force in construction alone could cost the state 56,000 jobs and \$6 billion in economic output.

While any economic harm may not be clear for some time, what is becoming clear is that the sanctions law and talk of other punitive measures are exacting a human toll in Arizona.

This is evident in the fear that undocumented immigrant workers – the real targets of the new law – feel.

This is evident also in the alienation and fear that many legal residents and citizens of Latino origin are experiencing because of a hostile public environment that is fueled by the rhetoric of some state and federal officials.

We hear this alienation and fear expressed by members of our parish communities. They fear for the separation of their families. They fear for the loss of their jobs. They fear they will be objects of hateful comments.

We consistently have said that we do not support illegal immigration. It is not good for society. It erodes the rule of law.

We do support, however, reform of an immigration system that is severely outmoded and in need of significant change.

We believe that the answer to the problems of illegal immigration is reform of our federal immigration system.

By creating visas for workers from other countries to work legally and by legalizing, through a fair and just process, the current undocumented workforce, the problem of undocumented workers without legal status will dwindle. Enforcement could more effectively focus on unscrupulous employers who continue to work outside the system. Needed border security could focus on drug and human traffickers who do harm to our communities.

Such reforms enacted into new federal laws would ensure that Arizona maintains a vital economy and workforce.

Importantly, these reforms would protect immigrants and their families from discrimination and separation from the greater community.

We believe that Arizona should lead the way in demanding from the federal government a comprehensive, effective and humane solution to our immigration crisis.

We believe that our state and local lawmakers should not be leading us further away from such a solution.

Echoing our 2005 pastoral letter, we again commit ourselves to work with others in our state for a comprehensive solution at the federal level that protects the rights and dignity of immigrants among us, that strengthens our communities, that protects our borders and makes us safer as a nation, that enriches our faith communities and that builds on the great immigrant heritage of which we Arizonans are rightly proud.