

Every Person Is a Neighbor: Bishop Galante's statement on immigration reform

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We are all familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable follows an exchange between Jesus and a lawyer. The lawyer is trying to test Jesus by asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the Mosaic Law, to which the lawyer replies: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus affirms that his answer is correct, but adds, "do this and you shall live." Here Jesus is emphasizing the importance of putting the Mosaic principal of love of God and neighbor into practice. Knowing the law is not enough. Action is essential.

But the lawyer, now parrying a bit with Jesus, asks, "And who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer's question seems reasonable enough, at first glance. However, implicit in the question is the notion, common at the time, that not everyone was to be considered a neighbor.

To answer the question, Jesus tells the story of a man who is attacked and left for dead by robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest saw the man, but passed him by, keeping his distance, walking on the other side of the road. A Levite did the same, both men-religious leaders of the time-concerned, apparently, with ritual impurity.

Jesus then gives the story a twist that must have made the lawyer squirm with discomfort: A Samaritan traveling on the road is moved with compassion at the sight of the man in need and reaches out to help him. He goes well beyond what anyone would expect in such a circumstance. He personally tends to the victim's wounds, carries the injured man to an inn, stays to care for him and gives the innkeeper financial support to keep him for the duration of his recovery.

The discomfort of the lawyer likely arose from two things: first, the tendency, not only of that time, but even today, of doing the bare minimum to meet our obligations toward God and our neighbor. Jesus tells us here that more is expected. Much more.

His discomfort also stemmed from the intense aversion Samaritans and the Jewish people had for each other. Samaritans would never have reached out to help a Jewish person, while Jews, for their part, looked down on Samaritans, dismissing them as unworthy even of acknowledgement. By making these the key figures in the parable, Jesus was upending conventional wisdom. He was, in essence, tearing down walls that divided people based on religion, law, class, geography and nationality. He was emphasizing that love and mercy trump legalism and other considerations.

Jesus also was making the point that every person is a neighbor worthy of care and concern, not because they've earned it, or because they're legally entitled to it, but because they have inherent dignity by virtue of their creation in God's own image. The artful question posed by the lawyer, then, is the wrong one. Jesus says do not ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Rather, he says, we must ask, "How can I be a better neighbor to every person?"

This question is one that we must pose to ourselves today, we who have the tendency to avoid, ostracize and discriminate based on gender, race, language, disability, sexual orientation, religious or political belief, social custom and socio-economic class. While overt discrimination is not always the norm, more subtle attitudes persist. Even in our own diocese, we sometimes have parishioners from one parish looking down on those from another with the unfortunate sentiment, "I will not go to that Church to worship, or choose that school for my children, because I do not cross the highway or associate with 'those people.'" These highways might as well be the 18 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We'll walk on the other side of the road just to avoid those with whom we'd rather not associate or be bothered.

Likewise, we often find it easy to love our neighbor in the abstract, when that neighbor is at a safe distance. We'll gladly donate to help those we cannot see or touch, perhaps phoning in a donation to a charitable organization, but will withdraw when the person who needs our attention is in our own midst. We say we believe that all people should have the right to live in a way worthy of their human dignity, but fight madly when affordable housing is proposed in the vicinity of our own neighborhood. We say that we oppose discrimination, but do not object when housing policies segregate our sisters and brothers into enclaves of poverty, denying them access to educational and employment opportunities that are necessary if they are to survive and thrive.

Jesus' parable that we are to be a neighbor to every person also has ramifications for the debate that is now underway on the issue of immigration reform. Today there are more than 10 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, most of whom have been here for some time as productive, contributing workers, many of whom pay taxes, without ever violating criminal law. They do not take jobs away from U.S. citizens, but supplement the native-born workforce. They do not burden or deplete public resources, but make a substantial contribution to the United States economy. We know that past waves of immigrants into this country-many of whom were our grandparents and great-grandparents-were not barred from entering our nation, did not require documentation, were not treated as criminals once they were here, and we know from experience how they greatly enriched our nation.

While we do not condone the unlawful entry of persons into this country, it is clear that current immigration laws are not working and actually contribute to the phenomenon of persons entering the country without proper documentation. That's because current laws keep families separated sometimes for decades and set arbitrary limits on temporary and permanent immigration that are far below both need and demand.

Further, while we must acknowledge the need to have enforceable immigration laws and must be attentive to legitimate security concerns that pertain to border enforcement, we cannot simply brand undocumented workers as lawbreakers and demand punitive enforcement actions as an excuse to walk away from our obligation to care for our immigrant sisters and brothers and to find ways to achieve meaningful reform.

Indeed, some of the measures that are being directed against those who seek entry to our country without documentation are deplorable. A new Arizona law, for example, states, that "where reasonable suspicion exists that a person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States, a reasonable attempt shall be made, when practicable, to determine the immigration status of that person." Since we're being so reasonable, we might reasonably wonder how even the most well-intentioned and skilled law enforcement official might identify the person who has proper documentation without resorting to profiling or the violation of basic rights.

Of course, measures such as profiling, blanket criminalization, the mass deportation of all that are here, or the violation of basic human rights not only are impractical and ineffective, but morally unacceptable. As I have emphasized in the past, it is essential that those who have not entered this country legally be treated humanely. People do not give up their human dignity or the right to due process because they-often compelled by forces that left them with no other option-entered this country without proper documentation.

The United States Bishops are not proposing "amnesty," but a path to citizenship through earned legalization for the undocumented persons now in this country. This process would require undocumented workers to work six years before applying for permanent resident status and they would not assume priority over immigrants who already have petitioned for permanent status. The Bishops also are proposing reforms that would increase the number of work visas awarded, reduce backlogs for families seeking reunification with loved ones, and address the root causes of migration.

In stating these broad principles, I do not seek to minimize the challenges of achieving meaningful immigration reform, especially given the legitimate differences of opinion on particular solutions. I am also cognizant of the charged political environment that exists today. In this regard, the road to Jericho might well represent the partisan divides that exist in our country and even within the Catholic community itself. Sometimes we cling so tenaciously to our political positions that we refuse to cross over to the other side of the road, with the result being a circumventing of the demands of the Gospel, as well as lost opportunities to address the pressing needs of our neighbors.

Even among committed Catholics, we sometimes become so focused on certain issues that we neglect concerns that are also deserving of our attention. Many pro-life Catholics, who exert tremendous effort on behalf of the unborn, too often stop there and fail to turn their concern fully to those already born. Likewise, those who have a strong commitment on issues that concern the poor and marginalized too often are silent when the discussion turns to protecting the life of the unborn. As Catholics who are pro-life from conception to natural death, we concern ourselves with all issues that have a bearing on the dignity of human life, we promote justice for the oppressed, and-moved to compassion-we cross the road to serve our neighbor, even when it is unpopular or uncomfortable.

On the matter of immigration reform, then, it is my prayerful hope that we do not allow ourselves to become mired in partisanship or distracted by rhetoric that is designed to play on fears and misconceptions. Rather, let us work together to achieve consensus on meaningful, humane reform. I am confident and optimistic that this can occur if we engage each other with respect and civility, and if we prayerfully root ourselves in the Gospel, asking not only "Who is my neighbor?" but, "How can I be a better neighbor to every person?"

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