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“Welcome the Strangers.” Pastoral Letter on Immigration Reform

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In union with the bishops of our nation, I wish to add my voice to the ongoing public debate on immigration reform. Recent news stories have highlighted the polarization that the issue of immigration has caused in our nation. In many of these stories, hostility, anger and misinformation seem to trump concern for human rights, human dignity and justice. Fueled by raw emotions and distortions of the truth, the issue of immigration has certainly sparked heated legal, social and national-security debates. In my own travels throughout the state, I have met many good people who hold strong feelings and attitudes about immigration (pro and con). All sides in the debate, however, agree on one thing: Our nation’s immigration system is broken, impractical and unjust, and needs to be repaired.

As I follow the debate and listen to pastors and parishioners throughout our diocese, I realize the complexity of the situation and the fact that there are no easy solutions. However, I am also very aware of the human dimension of the debate. On a daily basis, our parishes and social service agencies throughout Idaho and the entire country see the byproducts of current immigration policies – families are separated, workers are exploited, migrants are abused by smugglers, basic human rights are trampled and hundreds of individuals die needlessly in the desert. Because of this reality, I firmly believe that our immigration laws are outdated and no longer capable of addressing the economic realities and security needs of our times.

In the coming months, Congress has a significant opportunity to fashion immigration reforms that are humane and just, while at the same time serving our nation’s economic and national security needs. Along with the other bishops in the United States, I believe that any serious immigration reform needs to include the following elements:

- A broad-based, fair and realistic pathway to citizenship for the undocumented of all nationalities
- A reform of our family-based immigration system to allow family members to reunite with loved ones in the United States, thereby preserving the family unit
- A reform of the employment-based immigration system to provide legal pathways for migrants to come and work in a safe, humane and orderly manner
- A restoration of due process protections for immigrants.

For the Catholic Church, immigration is not a political issue, but a fundamental moral issue which impacts human rights, human life and human dignity. Because of this, we implore our national legislators to reform current immigration policy in a way that protects our national security, respects our common humanity and reflects the principles of justice upon which our country was built.

Our position may be at odds with much of the public sentiment expressed today. Yet, we stand firmly with our faith tradition which calls us to protect human life and dignity; to serve the poor, the vulnerable, and the stranger in our midst; and to challenge unjust public policies. The dignity of the human person, the bedrock principle of our Catholic social teaching, must be foremost in our thinking as we address the critical issues surrounding immigration.

From the earliest days, our nation has been a nation of immigrants. Immigrants have been a vital part of the fabric of our country and have made substantial contributions to our economic and social life. Yet today, we find ourselves at a critical juncture regarding our openness to newcomers. As bishop of the Diocese of Boise, I challenge all parishes and individual Catholics to pray for and with all those affected by this crisis, to become educated on the reality of immigration in our country, to work for the creation of a just and realistic immigration policy, to recognize Christ in the person of every immigrant, and to proclaim the church's message of hope and welcome in our local communities. All are necessary to dispel the "myths" about immigrants, to achieve a compassionate immigration process in our country and to remain true to the social teachings of our church. Our common faith in Jesus Christ implores us to "hunger and thirst for justice" and to "welcome the strangers" among us as our neighbors. In light of this Gospel mandate, we can do no less! It is my hope, and that of many other people of faith, that our hearts will become more open to the plight of the immigrant and that our elected federal officials will enact comprehensive reforms which are humane, realistic and responsible.