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Catholic bishops release immigration statement

In anticipation of the U.S. Senate's expected vote on comprehensive immigration reform legislation this week, the Bishops of Washington State, in coordination with Archbishop José Gomez, Chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration Committee, released the following statement.

June 27, 2013

This week, the U.S. Senate will consider final passage of S. 744, the Border Security, Economic Competitiveness, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013, comprehensive immigration reform legislation. It is a critical moment for millions of immigrant families and for the country.

The legislation before the U.S. Senate will include the Corker-Hoeven amendment, which dramatically increases border enforcement and requires that unprecedented enforcement resource goals are met prior to undocumented immigrants receiving permanent resident status. It also eliminates Social Security credits earned by undocumented immigrants and requires the payment of assessed back taxes.

The U.S. bishops have serious concerns with the Corker-Hoeven amendment, most significantly its focus on enforcement along our southern border. While Catholic teaching supports the right of a sovereign to control its border, we are troubled that this dramatic expansion of enforcement resources could adversely impact border communities, not to mention make migrants more vulnerable to smugglers and death in remote parts of the border. As we have stated in the past, we believe that addressing the root causes of migration, such as the absence of living-wage employment in sending countries, is the long-term, humane solution to the challenge of irregular migration. We urge Congress to consider these issues in the context of immigration reform.

Moreover, making the path to citizenship contingent upon these enforcement goals risks leaving millions of undocumented persons in a permanent underclass. There are questions whether these goals can be achieved, not to mention if they should be achieved. We will work to modify these provisions in the future.

Nevertheless, understanding the need for bipartisan compromise on a very difficult issue, we continue to support moving this legislation forward at this stage of the legislative process. In our view, the overall benefits of this legislation outweigh the adverse impacts of our current system, which relegates millions to living in the shadows and subjects them to family separation, detention, and exploitation. We reserve the right to oppose immigration reform later in the process, should the path to citizenship become inaccessible or eliminated.

The legislation also must be improved in the following ways:

1. The path to citizenship should be made more affordable and accessible for undocumented immigrants and their families;
2. Family unity should be enhanced in the legal immigration system;
3. A viable and robust program for low-skilled workers to enter and work legally should be included, with appropriate worker protections;
4. Due process protections, including alternatives to detention, should be restored to the system; and
5. The root causes of migration should be addressed.

We encourage the House of Representatives to begin consideration of immigration reform legislation which meets these principles. The process of fixing our immigration system, which has been broken for decades, will not end once Congress passes immigration reform legislation.

The U.S. Catholic bishops will continue to work for improvements in the U.S. immigration system, now and into the future.

The statement was approved by Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain; Bishop Blase Cupich of the Spokane Diocese; Yakima Bishop Joseph Tyson; and Seattle Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo.

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