

# Wenski to candidates: Speak truth on immigration

## Stop demonizing and scapegoating, bishop says.

Thomas G. Wenski | Special To The Sentinel

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One of the more disturbing aspects of the presidential campaign has been the searing attacks by some of the presidential contenders on undocumented immigrants. Labeling them as "illegals," candidates are using immigrants as scapegoats for the larger issues besetting our country: a slow economy, an inadequate health-care system, an unpopular war and, most particularly, a broken immigration system. Such populism might win some votes on the fringes, but it portends bad policy decisions in the future.

Immigration has been part of the story of our state long before it became an issue on the national scene. There have been bumps in the road, to be sure, but today Florida is one of the most ethnically diverse states in the nation. Immigrants have contributed and continue to contribute to the prosperity of our state in all areas of our economy. And so Floridians should demand that the candidates provide facts, and not just rhetoric.

For example, Floridians will hear that illegal immigration is out of control and must be stopped. It may be true that some 500,000 immigrants each year enter the U.S. without documentation or overstay their visas. But this only underscores what immigrant advocates have been saying: The system is broken. What Floridians do not hear is that within six months nearly 90 percent of these migrants find work. What Floridians are not told is that there are only 5,000 permanent visas granted each year for unskilled labor to come to the United States legally.

In other words, there is a demand for foreign-born workers but a severe lack of legal visas for unskilled labor to enter this nation legally and safely. The enforcement-only, "throw them all out" proposals put forth by some of the candidates ignore this vital fact and provide no solutions for businesses that depend on their labor.

Obfuscation is also prevalent when the issue of "amnesty" is discussed. What the candidates may not tell you is that the proposals considered on Capitol Hill did not offer "amnesty." Neither the earlier McCain-Kennedy proposal in 2006 nor Florida Sen. Mel Martinez's abortive attempt at a "grand compromise" last year were "amnesties." These proposals required, among other things, the payment of fines, back taxes and English competency -- and this before an undocumented immigrant would be allowed to stand in the back of the line to apply for a permanent legal status. The last real amnesty granted undocumented immigrants was the legislation signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, more than 20 years ago.

Moreover, at the same time some of the candidates offer only deportation as the answer to the problem of 12 million undocumented in our country, they do not acknowledge that deporting this number, either by removing them or through attrition, is wholly unrealistic. These millions of people have worked hard in jobs that otherwise would have gone unfilled. Couldn't the candidates recognize the immigrants' sweat equity and acknowledge that perhaps providing them a chance to earn permanent residency through a truly comprehensive immigration legislation may be in the nation's best interest?

Candidates of both parties have generally evaded any serious engagement with the immigration issue. Congress' failure to act last year continues to generate divisive and acerbic debate. Pandering to neo-nativist sentiments, as some candidates have done, does not serve the public interest, which should be the motivation of any candidate's ambition for public office.

On the Republican side, harsh rhetorical exchanges have been disguised as policy debates. Only one candidate so far has showed the courage to refrain from the scapegoat game, rightly calling immigrants "children of God." On the Democratic side, the candidates have not been "profiles in courage" on this issue, either; they timidly send signals that they support the need for comprehensive immigration reform but have done little to educate the electorate about the need for such legislation.

As the Florida primary approaches, the presidential candidates have an opportunity to offer some light, and not the heat of harsh rhetoric, on immigration reform.

As Floridians, we should demand constructive dialogue on an important national issue that also is of vital importance to our state. Harsh rhetoric that demonizes immigrants and does not offer concrete solutions to a broken immigration system should not be tolerated - it belongs to another less enlightened age when similar tactics were part of the Southern political scene. That national politicians seeking the votes of Floridians fail to recognize this shows a fundamental disrespect for the compassionate people of our great state.

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