

**Statement of Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes
on
Immigration Enforcement Initiatives**

September 27, 2007

The failure of the United States Senate to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation has set back, not ended, attempts to comprehensively repair an immigration system that is seriously flawed. It is disturbing our nation has yet to find the will to humanely address this challenging issue confronting our nation.

The immigration reform debate, while provoking informed analysis and thoughtful discussion, also has generated harsh rhetoric against migrants in this country, particularly those without legal status. Fanned by talk radio and by anti-immigrant organizations, this rhetoric has inflamed fears and misunderstanding among some portions of the American public, leading to a polarized and vitriolic atmosphere.

While at the moment the voices of division and fear are loud, with more education the truth about immigration and migrants in this country ultimately will prevail. Migrant workers, including the undocumented, provide great contributions to our nation's economy by working in vital industries, such as agriculture, construction, and service. Yet, our country has refused to acknowledge these contributions and has instead relegated them to a permanent underclass of workers, without full rights in our society. This is unworthy of a great democracy.

Moreover, the full consequences of federal inaction on immigration reform are becoming more apparent, as migrant workers across the nation have become increasingly subject to enforcement raids and other actions that separate families and lead to exploitation and abuse. We are gravely concerned with enforcement actions that divide families and target schools, churches, hospitals, and social service centers, where migrants receive assistance for basic human needs.

Legislation and administrative enforcement initiatives at the federal level also are cause for concern, particularly a recently announced package of enforcement measures by the Administration. Central to this package is the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) plan to use Social Security Administration (SSA) "no-match" letters, which notify employers when an employee's social security number does not match the SSA database. DHS and SSA should not use wage and tax data to enforce immigration law. We are fearful that, because of the inadequacy of SSA and DHS databases, the use of the SSA "no-match" letters could lead to the termination of bona fide workers. We are concerned that the issuance of the letters could be used by unscrupulous employers to discriminate against certain workers.

Congressional inaction also has emboldened state and local governments to fill the federal void, addressing the issue locally through state legislation and local ordinances. These actions are creating a patchwork of immigration policies across the nation. To compound matters, local jurisdictions have been pitted against each other, with some cities or counties passing anti-immigrant measures. State and local laws that seek to force migrants to leave the country by denying them the means to subsist not only violate human dignity, but undermine the common good.

We reaffirm our view that enforcement-only measures at any jurisdictional level will further drive undocumented migrant workers into a hidden underclass and create more fear and suspicion in immigrant communities. Such measures will not repair a system that is inadequate to meet the

labor needs of our economy.

The U.S. bishops acknowledge the right of our country to secure our borders and enforce immigration law. Such enforcement, however, must respect human rights and dignity and minimize the separation of families.

As the U.S. bishops have consistently stated, comprehensive immigration reform, which reforms all aspects of our immigration system, is the best way to secure our country and humanely and effectively address the problem of unauthorized migration to our country. We urge Congress to immediately return to consideration of comprehensive immigration reform. We call upon Catholics and all Americans to work together constructively to ensure a positive outcome to this vital national debate.