

Testimony of Kevin Collins, OMI on Immigration Policy before the Texas House of Representatives, Joint Committee of State Affairs and Border Affairs on March 28, 2007

Honorable representatives, thank you for inviting me today to give testimony in reference to the issues of undocumented immigration and border security. I am presently the Pastor of a large Roman Catholic Church in East Houston that serves many newly arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Our church belongs to the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and is a member of The Metropolitan Organization. The Metropolitan Organization is part of the Network of Texas Industrial Areas Foundation Organizations.

Our Network encompasses 13 sister organizations from the major metropolitan areas of Texas and from cities along the Texas-Mexican border. We listen to families in churches, schools, and other institutions across north, south, east, west, and central Texas in order to help them organize themselves to influence policies and practices that affect their lives. Our families cover a broad spectrum of ethnic groups, religious denominations, and income classes. We are one of the most broad-based ecumenical groups that I know of. As always, we do not endorse political candidates and remain non partisan.

I belong to the religious congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. We have over 4000 priests and brothers throughout the world. We are sent to evangelize the poor. At the invitation of Bishop Odin of Galveston, our French missionaries came to Texas in 1849. We rode on horseback up and down the Rio Grande Valley from Port Isabel to Roma. We built churches and brought the Gospel to many poor people. We continue to work in Texas as pastors, preachers and teachers, especially among people who speak Spanish. We have sent missionaries from Texas to all parts of the world.

I have been Pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church for over three and half years. We serve over three thousand families and the great majority of them are first generation Spanish speaking Catholics. They come to Houston and Texas because they want to work to feed their families that they try to bring with them, or have to leave behind in the country of their birth. Let me repeat: They come here to work. They don't come here for a hand out or to take advantage of any government program. They come to contribute and most times they contribute more than their share.

Let me share a story with you. One of my duties as a pastor is to prepare couples for marriage. When I first arrived in Houston, one of the couples with whom I was preparing were working there in Houston. He was a mechanic and she was cleaning houses. I would see them in church every Sunday. Marcelo would come with his cousins and Flavia would accompany them. They had a small marriage ceremony and reception because money was tight. After the

wedding, I would continue to see them. They were very faithful. Then one day I noticed that I had not seen them in a long time. Later, I saw their cousin and asked for them. Their cousin told me that they had moved to North Carolina to find better paying jobs. I haven't seen them in the past two years.

I hope this story illustrates what I have found to be very true. People migrate here to work, to feed their families, to have a better life.

I believe many people in our country have lost their moral compass and forgotten who they are. While it is true that we must be a country of laws, we must never forget that law was made for us not us for the law. Let me talk about having a moral compass. When I turned eighteen, my father finally let me get my driver's license. When he lent me his car to go somewhere he would tell me that he trusted me and he was sure that knew what to do. Nonetheless, he would always say: "Son, it is not enough to be right, because you can be 'dead right' ". He would say this because he wanted me to think and act with the idea in my head that just because the law gave me the right of way, I was to take into consideration the other people out there. Just because I had a green light, it didn't me I could drive into the intersection without looking to see if there was somebody else there. Just because I was following the law, it didn't give me the right to smash up "his" car and myself and whoever or whatever else was in my right of way.

While, our federal immigration system is broken and it needs fixing, that does not mean we should go about trying to fix it by making laws that are "dead right". Some of the proposals that you might be considering are deadly. They come from an attitude that only says: Those people broke the law; they are illegal. They are in our way. Let's run over them. This shows that many have lost their moral compass; they have forgotten who they are. My Church and the IAF Network have promoted changes in our immigration laws and system that respect the humanity of those who need to migrate. We believe we should not try to fix problems that are of the jurisdiction of the federal government.

We are approaching the feast of the Jewish Passover and the feast of the Christian Passover, Easter. These feasts celebrate events in the past that we use to teach how we should live today. They remind us of who we are.

The key events in the history of the Chosen People of enslavement by the Egyptians and of liberation by God led to commandments regarding strangers and aliens. "You shall not oppress the stranger; you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9 & Dt. 10:18); and "When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall not do him wrong...you shall love him as yourself" (Lv. 19:33-34). Israel's conduct with the stranger is both an imitation of God and the primary, specific Hebrew Bible manifestation of the great commandment to love one's neighbor: "For the Lord,

your God, is the . . . Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no bribes, who executes justice for the orphan and widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. For the Israelites, these injunctions were not only personal exhortations: the welcome and care of the alien were structured into their gleaning and tithing laws "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its border...you shall leave them (the gleanings) for the poor and for the sojourner. (Lv 19:9-10; cf. Dt 14:28-29).

The Gospel of Matthew recalls the migration of the Chosen People from Egypt as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph themselves were refugees in Egypt: "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Mt 2:15). From this account the Holy Family has become a figure with whom Christian migrants and refugees throughout the ages can identify, giving them hope and courage in hard times.

The Gospel also describes the mysterious presence of Jesus in the migrants who frequently lack food and drink and are detained in prison (Mt 25:35-36). The "Son of Man" who "comes in his glory" (Mt 25:31) will judge his followers by the way they respond to those in such need: "Amen, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

Church teaching has a long and rich tradition in defending the right to migrate. Based on the teachings of the Hebrew Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus, the Church's teaching has provided the basis for the development of basic principles regarding the right to migrate for those attempting to exercise their God-given human rights. Catholic teaching also states that the root causes of migration-poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts-must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families.

Let me specify these principles:

I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.

II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

All the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

We recognize the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but

reject such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

V. The human dignity & human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.

I realize that this committee does not represent a sovereign nation (although I bet some of them like me own "Republic of Texas" passports). Furthermore, I know the jurisdiction of the committee is limited. Nonetheless, the bills that come before this committee should be judged by these Judeo-Christian moral principles, especially the last one.

Our state laws should reflect family values. The immigrants among us are here to try to support their families and give them a better life than they had. The people of my parish have a strong sense of family togetherness and a strong work ethic. Many work two jobs. Many fathers have to leave their families behind to find work. Many men are rebuilding hurricane stricken areas of the Gulf Coast. When the roofers came to fix my brother's house in Biloxi, Mississippi, he would tell me that he could have used me to help translate. Also, his family would not have gotten back into their house as soon, had it not been for these migrant laborers. My mother's house is being fixed by men from Panama and Brazil. These men and women are helping us rebuild and contributing in many ways. In many ways they and their families are part of our future.

We owe them respect and gratitude. We should not be looking for ways to deny them the same rights and future that we afford those of us whose ancestors migrated here long ago. We ought to remember that their children are the least among us. We should not make it more difficult for their children to get a good education and good health care.

Let me close with a story of a man I knew from northern San Antonio. Not long ago he lived out in the country. Subdivisions started growing up around his

town. There was a town meeting of angry anti-growth residents. My friend, who was very conservative in his political leanings, got up and gave a wonderful allegory. He said that most families have children and try to provide the best for them. As their children grow, they make plans to retire and send their kids off. But sometimes when the parents think they are beyond their child-rearing days, God gives them the surprise of another baby. What do they do? They take the child in and raise it and love it just like the others. It wasn't what they had planned, but they do it anyway because that is what good people do, that is what they know God wants them to do.

We have many new unexpected "children" in Texas. God expects us to take them in and treat them as if they are our own. Our ancestors learned this from God's commandments. We should not lose our moral compass. Our Network believes we should not forget who we are or from where we came.

Reference: www.justiceforimmigrants.org

Bishop's documents:

Global anti-poverty efforts:

Many migrants are compelled to leave their homes out of economic necessity in order to provide even the most basic of needs for themselves and their families. The bishops call for international efforts designed to create conditions in which people do not have to leave their homes out of necessity. Trade, international economic aid, debt relief, and other types of economic policies should be pursued that result in people not having to migrate in desperation in order to survive.

Expanded opportunities to reunify families:

U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents must endure many years of separation from close family members who they want to join them in the United States. The backlogs of available visas for family members results in waits of five, ten, fifteen, and more years of waiting for a visa to become available. The bishops call for a reduction of the pending backlog and more visas available for family reunification purposes.

Temporary worker program:

The U.S. economy depends upon the labor provided by migrants. Therefore, many migrants come to the United States to fill jobs. The bishops acknowledge this reality and call for a more rationale and humane system by which laborers from other countries can enter the country legally to fill positions in the labor

force, including on a temporary basis. Because the U.S. experience with temporary workers programs has been fraught with abuses, the bishops call for a temporary worker program that includes:

- Path to permanent residency which is achievable/verifiable
- Family unity which allows immediate family members to join worker[1]
- Job portability which allows workers to change employers[2]
- Labor protections which apply to U.S. workers
- Enforcement mechanisms and resources to enforce worker's rights[3]
- Wages and benefits which do not undercut domestic workers
- Mobility between U.S. and homeland and within U.S.
- Labor-market test to ensure U.S. workers are not harmed

Broad-based legalization:

For those in this country without proper immigration documentation, opportunities should be provided for them to obtain legalization if they can demonstrate good moral character and have built up equities in this country. Such an "earned" legalization should be achievable and independently verifiable.

Restoration of due process:

In recent years, immigrants have been subject to laws and policies that debase our country's fundamental commitment to individual liberties and due process. These laws and policies, including detention for months without charges, secret hearings, and ethnic profiling, signal a sea of change in our government's policies and attitudes towards immigrants. We are a nation with a long, rich tradition of welcoming newcomers. Government policies that unfairly and inappropriately confuse immigration with terrorism do not make us safer, tarnish our heritage, and damage our standing abroad. The bishops urge our government to revisit these laws and to make the appropriate changes consistent with due process rights.

Vatican Secretary of State: Migrants have become an important source of labor. They not only earn a salary for themselves and their families but, if allowed to do so by legislators and their electorates, they will also become an important source of wealth for their host countries by maintaining standards of living through their contribution to the host economy. Migrants are often

motivated by the simple wish to work in order to support their families. They too deserve equal pay and equal protection under the law, not least because the jobs they do are often the ones that no one else wants. Legal arrangements should be made to allow families to reunite, not only for the sanity of family life, but also to the social and moral benefit of the communities around them. Too often a lack of normal family life leads to evils such as human trafficking and prostitution on the margins of migrant communities.