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FROM THE DESK OF FATHER JONATHAN

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Someone recently wrote me expressing dismay that he is being shamed by religious leaders, like the US Catholic bishops, and many others (including myself) for not being in favor of “illegal” immigration. “I am for LEGAL immigration”, he said, but not for anything “ILLEGAL”.

Allow me to share with you part of my response to him. Keep in mind I don’t write this from the comfort of a professor’s desk or as a politician seeking votes. This is my perspective as a pastor in the Bronx, New York where everyday I encounter the good and the bad of our immigrant communities.

First of all, I should say that I am not in favor of illegal immigration either. None of us should be. It’s bad for our national security and bad for immigrants. It should also be said that it is not only illegal to cross the border without permission, in most cases, it is also immoral (fleeing imminent danger is an obvious exception).

But we should be ashamed by our current system in which we entice immigrants to come over, however they can, with assurance of clandestine employment, but with no assurances of safety or just treatment. In this sense, I don’t mind shaming our indifference and ignorance on this reality and trying to awaken our national conscience.

In fact, sometimes it’s good for us to feel shame as it makes us rethink our positions. This is why I also speak out very strongly against abortion. I hope and pray “pro-choice” Catholics and other Christians feel some shame about their position, even if abortion is “the law of the land”. God’s laws are greater than the laws of any government.

It is not enough to say we are in favor of “legal” immigration, as if the simple enforcement of present laws would be enough to solve our immigration crisis. Democrats and Republicans (including President Trump) have failed so far to rectify the hypocritical system we currently have. This system uses cheap labor by saying you can’t come without a visa, and you can’t get a visa if you are poor, but if you manage to get across the border you will find work when you get here. And when you are here and we give you work we will pay you very little and you will have to live in the

shadows in fear of random ICE raids. Oh, and if a young child is brought here, with no fault of their own, and grows up here their whole lives, they will live in fear of being deported to a country they have never known.

It is an unfair and unsafe situation for all. But it is all too convenient for many of our small and big businesses, for example the restaurant, agricultural, landscaping, and construction industries, to name a few, who are profiting greatly and lobbying Congress to do nothing at all because the status quo means money.

Building a wall at the southern border is an enticing proposal because it is a visible barrier to what we consider the problem (illegal crossing), but it is not the ultimate solution because as long as the demand for cheap labor is high, supply will find its way here. The solution must involve diminishing the incentive to break the law, not by the inhumane separation of children from their parents or other Machiavellian methods, but rather through an overhaul of our temporary work and permanent visa system. Currently, if you live in Central America or Mexico, and are poor, it is almost impossible to get a work visa.

“Just get in line”, is a facile and offensive talking point because for most of the people crossing illegally, there is no line to get in. The same goes for the simplistic argument of blaming the countries of origin. Of course, these foreign governments are deserving of much blame, especially for corruption and violence, but complaining from afar doesn't get us anywhere.

What do we need? We need courageous politicians to put aside their political interests and do something big and bold. This is unlikely to happen until congress passes legislation establishing term limits for themselves (they are all in favor of this until they get elected). Perhaps a Constitutional amendment is our only hope to accomplish this (President Trump has said he agreed with congressional term limits, but has not pushed for it).

I am not a politician so it is not my job to draft, propose, and pass the urgently needed immigration reform legislation I have described in this column. I do know, however, that whatever they come up with, if it is to be big and bold action, must decrease the incentive of illegal crossing and vastly increase the possibility of legal crossing, and legal employment, especially through temporary work permits. A federal e-verify system is a necessary component to this. Warning....any politician who rejects an e-verify system is telling us he or she is not really interested in solving the crisis.

Now I will go back to taking care of the people in my neighborhood, both the American citizens and the many new and old immigrants, here legally or not. That's the moral mandate for a pastor. Let's pray that our politicians will fulfill their moral and political mandate, for the good of all.

God bless, Fr. Jonathan