



A time for immigration reform

By Archbishop JOSÉ H. GOMEZ

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We've reached an important moment in our national debate on immigration.

As I write, the U.S. Senate is set to begin debating bipartisan legislation that would make the most comprehensive change in our immigration laws in 30 years.

I am with my brothers in the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops meeting this week in San Diego for our annual midyear meeting. Much of our conversation has been focused on the immigration debate in Washington.

Last week, I was privileged to host a "consultation on migration" that brought together the bishops of Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, Canada and the United States. The meeting was sponsored by the U.S. bishops and was held at our Sacred Heart Retreat House in Alhambra.

The bishops of the Americas — North and South — are united in calling for U.S. immigration reform that secures the borders, defends the rule of law, protects human rights, and provides a path for legalization and citizenship for undocumented workers.

As the Senate debate begins, the U.S. bishops are urging our lawmakers to pass a bill that provides a clear and broad path to citizenship so that the maximum number of persons can be brought out of the shadows and become full members of our society.

The bishops also want to make sure that our immigration policy remains focused on families, which are the backbone of our society. Family unity, based on the union of a husband and a wife and their children, must remain the cornerstone of our nation's immigration system.

This debate about immigration is about the future of the United States — and about the future of the Church. The Catholic Church in this country has always been a Church of immigrants, just as America has always been a nation of immigrants.

Many of us have forgotten our immigrant roots. But our Church remains a Church of immigrants. In earlier generations, we welcomed newcomers from every nation in Europe. Today, we are still welcoming newcomers — but they come now mainly from Latin America, Asia, Oceania and Africa.

However, every day we are seeing the effects of a broken immigration system.

Families are separated, migrant workers are exploited, and our brothers and sisters are dying in the deserts outside our borders. By our political inaction we are allowing a large underclass to grow at the margins of our society.

For this great country — with its heritage as a haven for refugees and immigrants — this is morally unacceptable.

America has always been a nation of justice and law. But we are also a people of compassion and common sense. Right now, our system doesn't serve the rule of law or the cause of human rights. What we're doing right now betrays our values and is making our country weaker and more vulnerable.

It will be a difficult discussion in the Congress and the wider public, but I am optimistic that now is the time for true and just reform of our immigration policies.

I've been writing, speaking and advocating on the immigration issue for nearly 20 years. For me, our national debate about immigration is a great struggle for the American spirit and the American soul.

That's why I decided to write a little book in the middle of this big debate. It's called "Immigration and the Next America: Renewing the Soul of Our Nation" (Our Sunday Visitor, \$11.95).

I've been working on this book for a long time. It is not a political proposal or a work of scholarship. I am writing as a pastor who is concerned about the soul of America and the dignity and rights of the estimated 11 million souls who are here without proper documentation.

For me, immigration is a human rights test of our generation. But it's also a defining historical moment for America, a moment for national renewal.

America has always been a nation of immigrants with a missionary soul. In the midst of this great debate, my hope is that this little book might help us to recover that memory— and to reflect on what it is to be an American, and what is expected of us in this present hour.

So let's pray for one another this week. And let's ask Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Americas' to give our leaders — and all of us — the courage to work together for the common good of our nation.

Archbishop Gomez's new book, "Immigration and the Next America," is available for preorder at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels' Gift Shop (www.olacathedralgifts.com; <http://archla.org/abginabk>). Follow Archbishop Gomez at: www.facebook.com/ArchbishopGomez