



Interview with Archbishop José H. Gomez

Archbishop José H. Gomez answers questions on immigration, the future of America and how America can renew its soul.

By Gretchen R. Crowe - OSV Newsweekly, 7/14/2013

Our Sunday Visitor: In your book, [Immigration and the Next America](#), you say: “immigration is about more than immigration.” What do you mean by that?

Archbishop José H. Gomez: The issue of immigration in the 21st century, it makes sense when you really understand the origins of our country: that it’s a country of immigrants, obviously, and the participation of the different cultures in the formation of this country. I think, for obvious reasons that I mention in the book, what we mostly know is the Protestant-European immigration as the beginning of our country. But the reality is there are the Native Americans and there’s the Latino immigration to the Southwestern United States, and then later on all the different cultures that came to this country and now formed what we have. So I think it is important for us not to forget that. And especially the Catholic component of our country. Really when you look at the history of this country, Catholics were there since the very beginning. I think what we see now should be judged in the context of what our country is — especially because what we do now is what our country is going to be in the future.

In the same way that at some point it was possible to integrate the Germans, the Italians, the Irish, and all the different groups — [including] the African-Americans and the Native Americans —now we are in a sense at a crossroads because we have so many Latinos that are part of our country. In the case of Catholics, more than 50 percent of Catholics under 18 are Latinos. So, that’s what our country is going to be. It’s important for us to understand it’s not just about the 10 million that are here. It’s about who we are and who we want to be.

OSV: You mention that America needs to rewrite its story. How can we look back at the history of immigration in the United States and learn from it?

Archbishop Gomez: Obviously the values that are the origin of our country are very important: family, faith, community, respect for the law — all those things that are essential. But the new immigrants have

some of those same values. Once they come here, they need immediately integrate to those values. Some of those values come from the Catholic faith, so I think it's important to remember that. Obviously the challenge is not to fall into secularism, which is what is happening unfortunately to our country. So that's what for us Catholics is so important to be able to reach out, as the Holy Father is asking us to do, to young people especially, that they can understand that values come from their faith and that their culture is important for the future of our country. The challenge is not to lose their Catholic values.

OSV: What role can immigrants — and a sound immigration policy — play in maintaining those values?

Archbishop Gomez: In a lot of those immigrants that come from Latin America, those values are really deep in their culture: family, faith. There's an example I've seen in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles: Every single parish is packed with people in a city that is famous for everything except faith. You have the Latino community, you have the Filipino community, the Korean community. All of those are immigrants and they have deep values based in the Catholic Faith that allows them to integrate into American society. It's important for us to understand that and to strengthen those values as a way of making sure that our country continues the values that were part of our foundation.

OSV: You talk a little bit in the book about your own personal story. How does your experience affect your mission?

Archbishop Gomez: I think the first thing is the reality of my family being in both countries at the same time. My first relative came in 1805, which was still Spain at the time. Because then the Mexican independence was in 1810 so it became Mexico, then it became the United States. It's a region that includes parts of Southern Texas and parts of Northern Mexico. There were no borders, people just moved at that time. And the people on one side or the other side are the same people. I think it's important for people to understand that. The people south of the border are just as normal as we are. They are souls, and they have good solid families and committed Christians and Catholics.

The second thing is that with time the obstacles that we see, like language or education, are overcome. It just takes time for immigrants to advance in integrating themselves to the community. Now the number of Hispanic kids in higher education is growing and growing, and the number of Latino professionals is growing too. That's why, together with Archbishop [Charles J.] Chaput, I started the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders. There are many Latino professionals that have the same values, and it's important for them to feel that the Church is part of their lives. [The goal is] finding the way that these men and women can be fully accepted as active and positive citizens or members of our society.

OSV: Why do you think some people consider human beings south of the border to be different from those to the north?

Archbishop Gomez: I think there's always, as I mention in the book, a fear because some of them do not speak English and some of them do not have the same education that we have, that the people in this country have. So it's just fear. A lot of parishes have the Hispanic community and the English-speaking community, and there is usually no communication. So there's a little fear that these people are taking over, they don't speak our language, we don't really know what they think. I always recommend that Latino parishioners, and Spanish-speaking parishioners, become part of the parish council. So that when they get to know each other, everything is fine. I think part of it is fear because we cannot communicate sometimes.

OSV: Have you seen successful examples of that?

Archbishop Gomez: Absolutely — everywhere in the Archdiocese of Denver [where Archbishop Gomez served as an auxiliary bishop], in San Antonio [where he was bishop]. Where parishes start doing that, having things in common and together, then there is a beautiful unity. We used to have the national parishes, only for Latinos, for Irish or for Polish. Now we don't have that. I think little by little we are coming to the point that there is integration of both communities — like in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles [where] most parishes have English and Spanish and some other languages. I think people are coming together. Every year we have a Mass at the cathedral for cultures and the cathedral is packed and everybody is together, which is beautiful.

OSV: What does your vision of immigration policy look like? What would you ideally see lawmakers do?

Archbishop Gomez: The basic thing we are trying to help people understand, especially our politicians, is that there should be a path to citizenship, because if not, we are going to create an underclass that is really against the basic principles of our country. And secondly, the family unity. It is important for us to promote that because the people who come to this country, they come because they are looking for a job and they are trying to improve their families and do more for their families. And then the third thing is some kind of visa for people to work here. Most of the people that come to the United States, at least from Latin America, they're just looking for a job. So, if there's a good system of working visas, I think it would address the immediate immigration situation.

And then finally there is, as part of the teachings of the Catholic Church, the right of countries to protect their borders. But it's got to be reasonable. As I was saying, there was no border before. I think if we

have a reasonable way to protect our border, as we are doing. Because the fact is that right now immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries is coming to a stop because of the economic reality of our country. So if we have a reasonable protection of our borders, that's part of our plan.

OSV: Many people believe a wall is needed to protect our borders. What is your response?

Archbishop Gomez: Walls don't work. We have seen it in Europe. What we need, in my view, is a reasonable system for movements of people. A system that can be installed or developed that we know who is who. You have a working visa; you have the paper that says, just like what we did in Ellis Island for people that came from Europe, or in Galveston from the middle of the 1800s. When people were able to come, we knew who they were and there was no problem. And we don't have that right now. I think that a wall in itself isn't going to solve the problem. As a matter of fact, it's impractical; we're spending a lot of money; it's not doing the job. I think it's more important to find a way that people can move in a reasonable way.

OSV: There's a lot of concern about drugs, especially in Mexico and on the border towns. How do you respond to that?

Archbishop Gomez: Obviously most of the people who come to this country are good people. We have them in our churches and in our schools and everywhere. There are some people that are bad, that are doing violent crimes or they're breaking the law. Obviously there is no reason for them to come to our country, but that's a minority. So I think we have to make the distinction between those people that are coming here to commit a crime, or that are committing crimes over there and trying to come here, and most of the people that are here or trying to come here that are good and decent people. Obviously we need to address the security of our borders and also make sure that the people that come here are good people. But we look around and look at those 11 million immigrants that are already here: Most of them are good people.

OSV: Can you explain more about the phrase the "underbelly of society"?

Archbishop Gomez: Well, in a sense that we have people who have no rights, basically. We do not know who they are. They cannot even get a driver's license or provide for their children, or their children cannot go to college and they cannot get a job. Historically in our country, we had some of those experiences like with slavery or segregation. And then you create a class of people that are not equal and one of the basic principles of this country is that we are all equal because we are children of God.

OSV: If we were to get back to our roots, what does that look like from a faith and universal perspective?

Archbishop Gomez: The basic principles of our faith are the respect for the human person from conception to natural death, the community sense of the Catholic faith, even the commitment to work, because I think that is part of our Catholic faith. St. Paul says, “the one that does not work shouldn’t eat.” So it’s part of our faith. Those basic principles are what are going to be strengthened once these people that are here become citizens or become just active members of our community. They have those values. Sometimes they do not participate because they are afraid that they are going to be deported. [But] once that they have some kind of acceptance and are recognized as individuals and as members of our society, as legal immigrants or citizens, then they are actively going to participate. And that’s what they are teaching their children and that is what is going to be good for our country in the long term.

OSV: What do you hope the person who reads your book comes away with?

Archbishop Gomez: First of all a better understanding of the human person and also the history of the Catholic Church in this country. We have been through a lot of persecution in this country. We were a very important part in the foundation of this country. Most people do not know anything about the Southwest. Just the fact that Los Angeles is called “Los Angeles,” it comes from the Catholic faith and from the Latino evangelization. So that they understand better the first evangelization and in that way we can from now on engage more fruitfully in the new evangelization.

The second thing is I think that they can understand the value of the immigrants for our society. How the immigrants from Latin America, from Asia, from Africa, from everywhere, are a blessing for our country, not something negative or something we have to be afraid of, but something good and positive. It’s a blessing from God. That people with faith, with families, with love for our country — that they are going to be the foundation of the future of this country. So if I can help people better understand that, that would be wonderful.

OSV: What do you think about the immigration bill recently passed in the Senate?

Archbishop Gomez: I think it’s a good beginning. Some of the things are rather negative, especially everything that has to do with the border. For me it’s difficult to understand why we want to build a fence and engage thousands of soldiers or border patrol agents, when mostly it’s people coming here to work. You provide them with a visa that can allow them to work, there’s no problem anymore. But the numbers of visas that are allowed anymore — I think there are 200,000 — that’s not what the economy

needs, so that's why the problem is so big. But in general I think it's a really good step in the right direction and hopefully we can find a way to secure our borders and at the same time recognize the value of immigrants in our country.

OSV: What is the reaction to reading news stories about deportations or people dying in the desert?

Archbishop Gomez: It's horrible. They just take men and women from their children and the children are all by themselves. It's very, very sad. They are destroying families when the family is the basic cell of our country. For me, what is sometimes frustrating is that we do not do all we can to really address the problem and solve the problem because of politics, and that's sad. We are talking about human persons who are good, and they are coming to this country because they want to provide for their families and make our country better, and we reject them as bad people.

OSV: Do you see this fight as part of your mission?

Archbishop Gomez: Absolutely. Especially because I feel that that was [a mission of] Our Lady of Guadalupe. When I became a priest, and became a bishop, I felt that my mission was to bring to the people of this country the beautiful message of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is a message of the love of God and our Blessed Mother for all the people in the American continent. So I think part of my mission is precisely to help people to understand how the immigrants, especially immigrants from Latin America, are a blessing for our country.

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