



Clarifications on Immigration Reform

Statement #2: We should close the border first

Some Catholics argue: “Reforming immigration laws will do no good and actually only exacerbate the problem of illegal immigration if we do not deal with the problem of our porous border. The prudent thing is to close the border and then talk about what to do with the millions of people here illegally.” This argument usually includes the following appeal “During the 1986 immigration reform, there were 3 million immigrants legalized. We now have around 11 million illegal immigrants. If 1986 failed to stop illegal immigration, then any effort that does not close the border first will also fail.”

There are several problems with this argument:

- 1) What does closing the border mean? It usually means closing the Southern border, building a fence/wall, putting up surveillance measures, hiring officers, installing seismic detectors etc. Less clear is what is meant by “closed”? Would 90% effective count as “closed”? Is 100% closure possible without brutality? If 100% is the standard, then the border will never be “closed.”

What is certain is that any effort will take time. Should the other broken parts of our system remain unaddressed in the mean time? The prudent thing to do would be to secure the border at the same time that we are dealing with everything else.

- 2) The porous border is not the only problem, and we must respond to injustices. Families are being split up, laborers are being exploited, businesses are breaking the law with impunity, the Federal government is not enforcing its laws, the number of worker visas do not match the real needs of the American economy and so on. Injustices exist: moral and legal injustices. It is imprudent to ignore these as though the border is the only problem.
- 3) A lot has changed since 1986. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act made it illegal to knowingly hire illegal immigrants. The intent was that by penalizing business owners for breaking the law, the supply of jobs would dry up and remove the incentive to come here illegally. Instead, business owners got creative about skirting the law.

What’s changed? The internet and the advancement of computers have made ours a different world. E-Verify, the free, internet-based computer program created for employers to confirm their employee’s status, did not exist in 1986 and has been voluntary since 1996. Mandating its use for all employers would eliminate much of the employer fraud. What’s more, technology in identity cards has also advanced dramatically since 1986. A lot has changed since then.

Securing the border must be done to maintain the nation’s safety. However, it does not make prudent sense to refrain from every good work until that happens. Until the border is secure providing some legal status to those here, short of citizenship, is a step towards justice for immigrants, employers and the nation.