



Clarifications on Immigration Reform

Statement #3: Immigrants should simply get in line like everyone else.

This statement includes three variations: first, that those who come here should obey the laws like many of our ancestors did when they came from Europe in the 1800's; second, that those who come should go through the normal process that others immigrants go through today; third, that to legalize those who came here illegally is unfair to those who came legally. Let us bear in mind several facts, however.

1) U.S. Immigration law is relatively young.

The immigrants who came during the 1800's did not face immigration laws. The U.S. was a growing nation and did not deem it necessary to restrict immigration. It wasn't until the 1870's that any restrictive laws existed. Even then, the laws focused on persons of Asian descent. Restrictions on European immigration didn't begin until the 1920's, long after many of our ancestors arrived. So the comparison between today's immigrants and previous generations is not applicable.

2) There is no line.

We sometimes think that there is a neat line into which immigrants are invited as they hope to come to the U.S. In truth, if someone does not have an employer or family member petitioning for them, if they are not under political or religious persecution or don't have lots of money to invest in the U.S., then there is no line. They can only apply for a lottery, which is no line. This is the situation for the vast majority of immigrants.

Currently there are only 5,000 green cards available for low skilled laborers. Some temporary worker visas (1 year) stand at a mere 66,000 annually. Both numbers are severely below the demand for low-skilled labor in the U.S.

3) No one is being bumped out of "line."

The argument about fairness assumes that someone coming here illegally takes the place of someone coming here legally. This is not the case. The person who has come here legally is not bumped out of "line" because another person came here illegally. It also assumes that the person who came here legally would resent someone else who was fleeing grinding poverty in order to save their own lives. We need not presume that is the case for legal immigrants.

There is the question of those who overstay their visas. Some estimate that between 45% and 55% of illegal immigrants are here with expired visas. In those cases, better visa enforcement would be welcome. This is an aspect of reform which all Catholics should support.