

Hot Button Issues in the Immigration Debate

Below is a compilation of responses to assertions made by some Catholics about the Catholic Church position on immigration reform. They can be used during parish and diocesan events, media events, or when talking to a neighbor.

Assertion: Undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes.

Response: In fact, undocumented immigrants pay billions of dollars in sales, property, and income taxes each year. Legal and undocumented immigrants pay sales taxes and property taxes (rent or homeownership). Between one-half and three-quarters of undocumented immigrants pay federal and state income taxes, Social Security taxes, and Medicare taxes.

According to the Social Security Administration (SSA), undocumented workers pay as much as \$7 billion in Social Security and Medicare taxes each year. This is placed in an "Earnings Suspense File," an account used by SSA for returns without accurate social security numbers. It has been estimated that, since 1984, undocumented immigrants have contributed as much as \$520 billion to this account.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that undocumented workers pay taxes is that they were legally barred from receiving tax rebates under the 2008 economic stimulus package passed by Congress.

In policy terms, it is rational to argue for a legalization of the undocumented workforce so that all would pay into the income tax system, not just one-half. It is in the nation's fiscal interest to legalize these workers, so that they can file tax returns without fear and fully participate in the economy.

Assertion: Undocumented immigrants are a net drain on the U.S. economy because they use valuable resources and take public welfare.

Response: This is not true, for several reasons. First, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for any type of public assistance program. They are only eligible for emergency medical care and schooling for children. According to the Urban Institute, less than 1 percent of households headed by undocumented immigrants receive cash assistance (because of their U.S.-born children), while 5 percent of households headed by U.S.-born citizens do.

Further, studies demonstrate that immigrants (both legal and undocumented) pay more into the tax system than the benefits they receive. The National Research Council estimated in 1997 that an immigrant pays each year \$1,800 more in taxes than he or she costs in benefits."

In addition, opposition studies do not take into account the purchasing power of immigrants (including the undocumented) or their contributions as they continue to work

over time (as well as their children). These studies usually are single-year “snapshots” of the immigrant population that fail to account for the contributions of immigrants increase over time; count the cost of U.S.-born children (U.S. citizens) as “costs” incurred by immigrant households; and do not consider the purchasing power of or formation of businesses by immigrants.

As a general rule, undocumented immigrants do have a negative impact 1) upon initial arrival in the United States and 2) on state and local budgets, since their initial costs are born by these government levels. After two-three years in the workforce they become net contributors to the economy.

Assertion: Undocumented immigrants take jobs away from U.S. workers and drive down wages.

Response: Studies show that undocumented immigrants (and legal) *complement* the native-born workforce, do not *compete* with it. Immigrant workers labor in important industries, such as farm work (almost 50 percent), food preparation, building maintenance, and grounds cleaning (33 percent), and construction (22 percent), jobs Americans generally do not want. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, foreign-born workers accounted for 49 percent of the labor-force growth between 1995 and 2005.

At the same time, Americans are more educated (only 12 percent without a high school degree) and the fertility rate in the United States is projected to fall below replacement level (to 1.9 children per woman) by 2012. The Department of Labor has stated that there will be a shortage of workers in major industries (agriculture, construction, service) by as early as 2010.

The White House Council on Economic Advisors concluded in 2007 that roughly 90 percent of native-born workers experienced wage gains from immigration, totaling between 30 and 80 billion per year. A 2006 study by University of California-Davis economist Giovanni Peri found that native-born workers with a high-school diploma experienced wage gains from immigration of up to 3.4 percent between 1990 and 2004. Studies, such as a 2004 study by economist David Card of California-Berkley and the National Research Council in 1997, show that the wages of native-born persons without a high school diploma either remained constant or declined 1 percent because of competition from immigrants.

Assertion: My great-grandparents (and grandparents) came legally—why can't these new immigrants?

Response: They may have come legally at the time, but there might not have been laws governing immigration at the time. Until the late 19th century, there was virtually no regulation of immigration in this country—if someone could get here, they would be let in. If an immigrant arrived in a port of entry (like Ellis Island), they would be inspected and, and unless they fell into any exclusion categories (the “Chinese Exclusion Act of

1882,” for example) or were considered insane, they would be allowed to enter and remain.

Before the 20th century, there was no bureaucracy for enforcing immigration laws. The U.S. land borders were virtually unguarded and there was virtually no money for deportation of those here illegally. A 1924 law first set up a consular system which required visas obtained from a U.S. consulate abroad before admission.

Before 1924, there were no caps on legal immigration—the first caps on limitations of Europeans came after the great wave of immigration to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 created a quota system that favored West Europeans and, for the first time, required immigrants to present medical certificates to the U.S. consulates abroad prior to obtaining a visa to enter the United States.

Once exclusions and restrictions were placed on immigration to the United States, illegal immigration began in this country. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 led to an “illegal” Asian immigrant population. Laws were adopted to keep out less desirable groups, like Eastern and Southern Europeans, and the undocumented population grew. In 1925 the Immigration Service reported that 1.4 million immigrants were living in the United States illegally. A September 16, 1927, *New York Times* article described government plans for Coast Guard patrols to intercept Chinese, Japanese, Greeks, Russians, and Italians who were landing in Cuba and being smuggled illegally into the United States.

At the same time, many Europeans here illegally benefited from “amnesties.” A 1929 law, the 1929 Registry Act, allowed “law-abiding aliens who may be in the country under some merely technical irregularity” to register as permanent residents for a fee of \$20 if they could prove they had lived in the United States since 1921 and were of “good moral character.” Between 1925 and 1965, 200,000 undocumented Europeans legalized their status under this law.

Assertion: Undocumented immigrants should just get in line and play by the rules like everyone else.

Response: Yes, they should, and they would if there was any hope of them immigrating legally. However, our immigration system is so flawed that they do not have a realistic chance of entering the U.S. legally, at least not in a timely manner. There are not enough legal avenues, or visas, available to accommodate those who want to come, nor those who we need. In reality, there is no “line” for them to get into.

For example, there are only 5,000 permanent visas for low-skilled and unskilled foreign born workers to enter and work and live in the United States each year. There are a handful of seasonal visa programs (H-2A agricultural workers, H 2-B service workers, H-1B high-tech), but their numbers are limited and are temporary.

In contrast, there are approximately 500,000 immigrants who enter illegally or overstay their visas each year, and 90 percent obtain work within six months of their arrival. In the future, our economy will need low-skilled workers, since we are barely at replacement level reproduction rates and Americans are more highly-educated than in the past. In 1960 50 percent of the American workforce did not have a diploma; today it is only 12 percent.

As for entering to reunite with families, the waiting times are interminable. Legal permanent residents must wait up to six years for immediate family members to join them, while it takes over 20 years for more extended family members (siblings, married sons and daughters) to receive a visa. This is because of numerical quotas in the system and a high demand. Persons can enter as a refugee or asylum-seeker, but that is very limited. Last year the United States resettled only 48,000 refugees and allowed a lesser number to enter as asylum-seekers. Finally, only about 55,000 immigrants are allowed in under the Diversity Lottery system, which admits foreign nationals which may otherwise be underrepresented.

Assertion: Undocumented immigrants are criminals and commit crimes in the United States.

Response: In fact, immigrant populations have a lesser incidence of crime than U.S.-born populations. Although the number of undocumented persons in the nation has doubled since 1995, the violent crime rate, according to the Department of Justice, has fallen by 34 percent. This was the trend in border cities and other cities with large immigrant populations—San Diego, El Paso, New York, Chicago, and Miami. The incarceration rate for men from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala—nations which account for the majority of the undocumented—is much lower than U.S. native-born men. In 2000, 0.7 percent of foreign-born Mexican men and 0.5 percent of foreign born Salvadoran men were in prison.

Undocumented immigrants come to the United States to work and support their families. They do not want to break laws and be deported—it is not in their interest. They simply want to work. Conservative talk radio and anti-immigrant organizations will highlight the exceptions to the rule, but it is a small exception.

Assertion: We need to deport all undocumented persons and seal the border in order to prevent terrorist attacks.

Response: Seventeen of the nineteen 9/11 terrorist were in the country legally on student visas—the other two had overstayed their visas. Terrorist attacks are usually planned and carried out by operatives who have been in a country for some time. By legalizing the undocumented population and creating more visas for workers to enter legally, we better know who is in the country and who is coming, thus making us safer as a nation.

Assertion: These people are illegal and deserve no consideration in our society. They have broken the law. What part of “illegal” do you not understand?

Response: Yes, they have broken the law, but we must consider a number of factors before assessing a penalty.

First, we must consider that the law that they are breaking is a flawed law and whether it needs to be changed. All evidence shows that our economy needs low-skilled workers now and into the future, but our legal immigration system does not contain enough visas to accommodate a legal flow of workers. We therefore are relying on workers who are here illegally to perform jobs Americans will not perform—we are able to benefit from their work but at the same time offer them low wages without benefits and, when convenient, scapegoat them for our social ills.

Second, we must consider the *intent* and *effect* of the lawbreaking before exacting a penalty, factors often considered in courts of law. The *intent* of the lawbreaking is to work and support their families, while the *effect* is that their work benefits our economy. Therefore, we must adjust the penalty to meet the offense and to meet the best interests of the United States. If we benefit from their work, we should exact a penalty that also allows them to continue their work.

Assertion: Giving the undocumented legal status is an amnesty and rewards lawbreakers. It violates the rule of law upon which this country was built.

Response: We are not proposing an “amnesty,” but a legalization program which requires immigrants to pay a fine, any back taxes, and to work before getting in the back of the line. It would require undocumented immigrants to become legal or be deported, giving consistency to the system. This is not a “giveaway,” or a forgiveness of an offense. It upholds the rule of law, since undocumented immigrants will be paying for their offense and thus are accountable to the law.

It would not encourage more lawbreaking, since, under a comprehensive reform bill, the number of visas for low-skilled workers will be increased, allowing future flows of workers to come to the United States legally.

Assertion: The Catholic Church believes in open borders and only wants to increase the number of Catholics in the United States.

Response: The Church has taught consistently that a sovereign nation has the right to control and defend its borders. However, in order to serve the universal common good, a sovereign nation should attempt to accommodate immigration to the greatest extent possible.

The U.S. Catholic bishops believe that the best enforcement mechanisms are 1) economic development in underdeveloped nations, so that migrants can remain home and support their families; and 2) comprehensive immigration reform, which would replace illegality with legality, bring persons out of the shadows, and take pressure off our southern border by allowing workers to migrate legally and in a controlled manner.

As a universal organization with global reach, the Catholic Church understands the powerful forces that compel migrants to risk their lives to come to the United States. No walls will prevent migrants from attempting to migrate and support their families.

There are 68 million Catholics in the United States. There is no threat that the church in the United States will go out of business. The church speaks out because the immigrants are *already here*, not because we are encouraging them to come.

Assertion: Immigrants do not integrate into American society and they do not learn English. They are taking away our culture.

Response: Studies show that first-generation immigrants (adults who arrive undocumented) have difficulty learning English at first, but learn enough English to communicate at a basic level within the first two years of arrival. Second-generation immigrants are fluent in English. Immigrants understand that to succeed in the United States you have to speak English.

Immigrants have been arriving in the United States for two centuries and have not taken away our culture, but defined it. The United States is strengthened by the diversity of nationalities that make up the citizenry, as we are able to experience the best of different cultures. It is no different today.

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