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**Immigrants Gain the Pulpit; Cardinal Mahony says he will ask priests to provide aid without proof of documentation even if proposed restrictions become law.**

**Teresa Watanabe, Times Staff Writer**

**Wading back into the growing debate over illegal immigration, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony on Tuesday denounced what he called "hysterical" anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping California and the nation.**

**In an interview on the eve of Ash Wednesday, Mahony said he planned to use the first day of the Lenten season to call on all 288 parishes in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, the nation's largest, to fast, pray and press for humane immigration reform. U.S. Roman Catholic bishops support proposals for a guest-worker program, legalization of undocumented immigrants and more visas for migrants' families.**

**Mahony also criticized efforts by the Minuteman Project and other immigration control groups to police the border, saying that such efforts were a misguided reaction to national security concerns.**

**"The war on terror isn't going to be won through immigration restrictions," he said, adding that Al Qaeda operatives would not trek through miles of deadly desert to infiltrate the nation.**

**As spiritual leader of the 5 million-member archdiocese, Mahony adds a powerful voice to what has become an acrimonious debate over illegal immigration, coming as the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee takes up a series of proposed immigration controls this week.**

**In his most forceful comments to date, Mahony said he would instruct his priests to defy legislation -- if approved by Congress -- that would require churches and other social organizations to ask immigrants for legal documentation before providing assistance and penalize them if they refuse to do so. That provision was included in the immigration bill recently passed by the House of Representatives; a similar proposal is in the version that the Senate Judiciary Committee plans to begin debating this week.**

**Although some parishes engaged in civil disobedience during the sanctuary movement to harbor Salvadoran refugees during the 1980s,**

**Mahony's call to all priests to defy the law would mark a first for the cardinal.**

**"The whole concept of punishing people who serve immigrants is un-American," Mahony said. "If you take this to its logical, ludicrous extreme, every single person who comes up to receive Holy Communion, you have to ask them to show papers. It becomes absurd and the church is not about to get into that. The church is here to serve people.... We're not about to become immigration agents. It just throws more gasoline on the discussion and inflames people."**

**Mahony has long been a strong advocate of immigrant rights, opposing efforts to deny public benefits to undocumented migrants through Proposition 187 in 1994. California voters approved the widely popular initiative, but it was later struck down by the federal courts as unconstitutional.**

**Immigration has once more risen to the top of Mahony's agenda because of what the church believes is a punitive House immigration bill that criminalizes aid to undocumented migrants and contradicts gospel values, said Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala of the archdiocese's San Gabriel Valley region.**

**"With the Minutemen, you roll your eyes and say these people are out on the fringe," Zavala said. "But when it starts getting to legislation, it is imperative to speak out."**

**Immigration control groups disagreed with Mahony's remarks.**

**Ira Mehlman, of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said the cardinal was failing to address the costs of illegal immigration on low-wage American workers, local governments, public schools and the healthcare system. Instead, he said, Mahony was asking others to give up their jobs and resources for undocumented immigrants.**

**"Charity is an important tenet of the Judeo-Christian faith, but there are limits," Mehlman said.**

**Chris Simcox, president of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, said its border patrol efforts were not mean-spirited but were meant to stop drug dealers, human traffickers, gang members and others who prey on U.S. citizens and immigrants alike.**

**Immigration expert Wayne Cornelius said Mahony's efforts to mobilize the archdiocese, while late, could help offset what he called the political advantage now held by immigration control forces.**

"All of the momentum is on the restrictionist side of the debate," said Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego. "It's important that Congress hears there are groups opposed to drastic restrictionist measures. If there is any chance of getting constructive legislation out of Congress this year, it will take grass-roots efforts" such as the Catholic campaign.

Mahony plans to speak on immigration policy at two Ash Wednesday services today. He said it would be the first time he has asked the entire archdiocese, which covers Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, to mobilize on a social issue. Mahony has led the archdiocese since 1985.

In addition to calling for a Lenten fast to reflect on the contributions of immigrants, he said, he has sent informational packets to all parishes on how to preach, teach and lobby on the issue.

He said he also planned to step up his personal political advocacy, starting with a letter to California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a Senate Judiciary Committee member and opponent of large-scale guest-worker programs outside agriculture.

"There is enormous ignorance out there," said Mahony, disputing as "myths" accusations that undocumented immigrants take jobs from Americans or don't pay taxes. "This is a teachable moment to help people understand that all of us are immigrant people."

The local efforts are part of a national campaign called Justice for Immigrants, recently launched by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and other church organizations.

Other Southern California dioceses also are mobilizing their flocks. In Orange County, parishes have started a postcard campaign to lobby their elected representatives on the issues, Auxiliary Bishop Jaime Soto said.

Mahony, a Los Angeles native of Italian and German descent, said his personal passion on the issue was sparked as a child, when he became close to the mostly Mexican immigrants who were hired to work at his father's poultry plant in the San Fernando Valley.

As an elementary school student, Mahony said, he personally witnessed what he called a "terrifying" immigration raid on his father's plant, leaving him with an indelible impression about the abuse of immigrant workers.

He said that both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures were consistent and clear about the moral imperative to care for strangers and aliens. The Jewish people were aliens in Egypt, he said, and Jesus was a refugee who was escaping from King Herod. God clearly instructed Moses to care for aliens, orphans and widows in his midst, Mahony said.

"This is part of our heritage of God's care and concern for all peoples," Mahony said. "At no point ... is God asking us to build walls on borders."

He added that he would put the full weight of his office behind immigration reform "as strongly as I can."

"We need to bring a moral and ethical dimension to the debate, which has been far too politicized," Mahony said. "We need a wake-up call, and this is it."