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HEADLINE: Mahony's Lenten Message Irritates Some at Service

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BODY:

Stepping up his campaign for humane immigration reform, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony urged his Roman Catholic flock at a packed Ash Wednesday service to "make room in our hearts" for immigrants, but his message drew mixed reviews.

While many Catholics hailed the cardinal's remarks, delivered on the first day of the Lenten season at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles, others expressed anger that he injected politics into a religious service.

"I came for my ashes, and I don't like him to be so political," said Josee Kubiak, a 75-year-old Belgian immigrant and retired lab technician. "He has no business butting in on this."

Emerging from the cathedral with an ash-smudged cross on her forehead, Kubiak said she legally immigrated to the United States in 1952, with a proper sponsor and health checks. But today, she said, "we are overrun with illegals and they want everything for free. I am very much resentful, and especially that the Catholic Church wants to support them."

Dolores Luna, a retired Los Angeles nutrition specialist and fourth-generation Mexican American, said the church and society needed to take care of Americans first before opening the doors to more immigrants.

But Marilyn Carino, 52, a government tax examiner and Filipino immigrant, hailed Mahony. "The church should be a sanctuary that welcomes everyone no matter where they come from," she said.

Mahony said this week that he intended to ask the 288 parishes of the 5-million member Los Angeles Archdiocese to fast, pray and press for more tolerant and humane immigration reforms during the 40-day Lenten season of reflection and penitence. He denounced what he called "hysterical" anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping the country.

The remarks drew several "nasty and emotion-filled" calls to the archdiocese Wednesday from callers demanding harsh measures against undocumented immigrants, according to archdiocese spokesman Tod Tamberg. But they did not deter Mahony from reiterating his message to a multicultural crowd of 3,000 at the noontime service, just a day before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee prepared to open debate on immigration reform proposals.

Wearing a red skullcap and purple robes, Mahony told the congregants that the church did not support unfettered immigration, but a solution to what he called a broken system. Then he outlined five principles for immigration reform developed in a national "Justice for Immigrants" campaign by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops and other church organizations.

They include more visas for family members of migrants to reduce what can be decades-long waits to reunify; a guest worker program with a path to permanent residency; better legal processes to guarantee immigrant rights; legalization of undocumented migrants; and economic development in poor countries to reduce the need to migrate.

"The church has always been in the forefront of welcoming waves of immigrants," Mahony said, reminding congregants of their own probable immigrant roots. "This has been a constant theme of the church since the 1700s."

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He asked congregants to use the Lenten season to open their hearts to Jesus Christ, each other and immigrants.

"There seems to be strident voices that are very much anti-immigrant," he said. "But here in Los Angeles, we have such an enormous diversity of people ... each one of you is a gift and a blessing."

The message struck deep chords with Tess Bautista and Rea Lazo, two sisters who emigrated from the Philippines two decades ago to escape poverty in their hometown of Manila. "We all come from different countries and we need to unite," said Lazo, 39, a Los Angeles accountant.

In particular, the sisters said, they supported the bishops' call for economic development in countries such as the Philippines; both said they would have much preferred to stay in their homeland than immigrate.

"Nothing compares to staying in your own home," said Bautista, 42, a Los Angeles accountant. "If opportunities were there, why would you leave?"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: (B1)CONTROVERSY: Cardinal Roger M. Mahony's remarks on immigration irritated some at Ash Wednesday Mass. B3 PHOTOGRAPHER: Bob Chamberlin Los Angeles Times

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