

Copyright 2006 Los Angeles Times

March 4, 2006

## Catholic Leaders Hope to Sway Immigration Debate

Teresa Watanabe, Times Staff Writer

Despite upsetting some parishioners opposed to mixing politics and religion, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony's recent call for more tolerant and humane immigration reform is part of a larger and well-orchestrated campaign by Roman Catholic Church leaders to influence new policies now being debated by Congress.

Concerned about public attitudes toward immigrants since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, U.S. Roman Catholic bishops and other church organizations have launched a national campaign to press for new laws to promote legal status, strengthen public opinion about the positive contributions of immigrants and organize Catholic legal service networks to assist migrants.

"In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his followers to 'welcome the stranger' because 'what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me,'" Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, archbishop of Washington, said last May in outlining the goals of the three-year campaign. "Ultimately, the Justice for Immigrants campaign is a response to the Lord's call, for in the face of the migrant we see the face of Christ."

As a U.S. Senate committee began hearings this week on newly proposed immigration controls, the bishops said their campaign primarily targets their own flock of 65 million Roman Catholics, who comprise the nation's largest religious denomination but do not necessarily agree with their church's teachings on immigration.

In 1994, a Times exit poll found that 49% of California's Catholic voters supported a statewide initiative, Proposition 187, to deny public benefits to undocumented immigrants, despite Mahony's outspoken opposition.

A similar 2004 poll found that 56% of Catholics supported Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's veto of a bill to give driver's licenses to undocumented migrants.

"We want to reach out first to Catholics and change hearts," said Auxiliary Bishop Rutilio J. del Riego of the San Bernardino Diocese, whose Bishop Gerald R. Barnes heads the migration committee of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. "This is not about politics from our point of view, this is about how we treat other human beings."

But some Catholics question how persuasive the bishops can be, saying their moral authority has been damaged by their handling of the church's sex abuse crisis.

The bishops, including Mahony, have been widely criticized for covering up sex abuse cases, transferring abusers to other parishes rather than removing them, casting aside victims and failing to fully cooperate with efforts to prosecute perpetrators.

"The bishops' influence is at an all-time low," said William A. Donohue, president of the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. "Some people are saying, 'Listen, don't lecture us about morality when you have a house full of dirty laundry. There's quite a rebellion among Catholics, and this knows no ideological grounds -- it cuts across liberals and conservatives.'"

Still, Donohue hailed the bishops' immigration campaign, saying the way for them to regain their moral authority is to aggressively proclaim church teachings on public issues, as Mahony did this week.

Complaining that most bishops have fallen silent on public issues, Donohue added: "There is no question there's been an attrition of their moral prestige, but the only way to get it back is to take some risks."

Locally, the campaign has also heartened Catholics who were sharply critical of Mahony's handling of the clerical sex scandal.

"We've gotten a huge amount of press for the abuse scandal, so a lot of people remember us for that," said Mary Ellen Burton-Christie, a parishioner at St. Agatha's Church in Los Angeles. "We don't get a lot of press about our social teachings, so I'm really glad when the church starts talking about them."

Not all Catholics, however, agree with the bishops. At St. Monica's Church in Santa Monica, about half of the 15 or so calls and e-mails on the immigration issue this week took issue with Mahony's remarks, said pastoral associate Delis Alejandro.

She said the dissenters were particularly troubled by Mahony's call for priests to defy any legislation, if passed by Congress, that would require checks on the immigration status of people before giving them aid.

Leo Anchondo, the Catholic campaign's national manager, said about 70 of the nation's 197 dioceses have signed up to promote the issue.

The campaign has mailed out thousands of "resource kits" to church leaders, instructing them on how to preach about and debate the immigration issue, how to deal with the media and even what Scriptures to quote to defend their position.

The campaign also has a website with instructions on how to contact legislators and direct immigrants toward legal services.

The bishops' campaign seeks more visas for family members of migrants; 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.

Anchondo said the campaign's genesis is rooted in a 2003 joint pastoral letter on immigration by U.S. and Mexican bishops titled, "Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope." He said the bishops were concerned that the national debate on immigration was turning "mean-spirited" and wanted to counter what he called misinformation about migrants.

Indeed, the campaign kit includes a sheet on what it calls myths about immigration. It argues, that immigrants create jobs for U.S. workers and pay taxes -- and includes references to studies supporting their points.

Dioceses around the nation have scrambled to respond, Anchondo said. In Arizona, all of the bishops have issued a state pastoral letter urging open arms to immigrants. In Colorado, the Pueblo diocesan bishop declared 2006 as "Migration Year" and has held several educational sessions on immigration.

The Chicago Archdiocese is organizing a priests' advocacy group and started a letter-writing campaign.

In San Bernardino, Del Riego said the diocese has so far held orientation sessions for leaders at 51 of its 97 parishes, scheduled seven public informational meetings on immigration and planned to send out five bishops over five consecutive weeks to give media interviews on the issue.

And in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, several pastors said they had just received the national campaign packets and expected to plan a response in coming weeks. Some pastors, such as Father Michael Gutierrez at St. Anne Church in Santa Monica and Msgr. John F. Barry of American Martyrs Church in Manhattan Beach, said they preached on the issue this week, asking people to reflect on immigrants during the Lenten season.

**"If you want to live out your faith, you have to understand you cannot abandon those in need," said Barry, recalling his own Irish immigrant roots. "In the eyes of God, no one is illegal."**