

Church Officials Join U.S. in Promoting Amnesty

The New York Times

March 8, 1988, Tuesday, Late City Final Edition

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Section: Section A; Page 23, Column 1; National Desk

Length: 653 words

Byline: By ROBERT REINHOLD, Special to the New York Times

Dateline: LOS ANGELES, March 7

Body

With only 58 days left before the yearlong amnesty program for illegal aliens expires, leaders of the Roman Catholic **Church** today joined with Federal immigration officials here to urge all those eligible to take advantage of the program before it is too late.

It was, in many ways, an extraordinary event that saw Archbishop Roger Mahony of the Diocese of Los Angeles, long a champion of downtrodden Mexican immigrants, climb up on the same public platform with Harold Ezell, the Western regional commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, long the nemesis of illegal aliens.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity" the Archbishop said. "Come forward. We need you. You need this program." Minutes later, Mr. Ezell, flanked by his five district directors, also urged aliens to take up this "historic" opportunity.

More than half of the aliens eligible for the amnesty, which applies to those living in the United States continuously since Jan. 1, 1982, are believed to live in Southern California. There have been concerns nationally that many who are eligible have avoided applying, either out of procrastination, fear of exposing family members or because of the cost.

The comments of Archbishop Mahony and Mr. Ezell came at the end of a meeting at the Marriott Hotel near the Los Angeles International Airport between church and immigration officials to map the final weeks of the campaign. March 19 has been designated "Amnesty Awareness Day" in the region. On that day, churches will hold amnesty fairs, and Mr. Ezell will travel about, giving talks.

Nationally, as of last Thursday, 1,335,915 aliens had applied for amnesty. The Immigration Service now estimates that from 1.5 million to 1.7 million will apply by May 4. This is lower than what had been expected.

"We thought we'd be seeing a little more than this, but the predicted upward trend here at the end is beginning," said Duke Austin, spokesman for the agency in Washington.

More than half of the applications, 792,623, have come from the Western regions, which includes California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii and Guam, but the bulk are from Los Angeles, 531,312.

Immigration advocates had originally feared that Mr. Ezell, who has a reputation for being tough on illegal aliens, might attempt to thwart the spirit of the amnesty, but he has become one of the program's most vigorous backers.

"It's the law, and it gives the Immigration Service the opportunity to wear a white hat for a change," Mr. Ezell said. "To show we have a heart, that we are more than cops."

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The agency has prepared a videotape, is handing out calendars with the message in six languages and is relying on Catholic parishes to spread the message. Mr. Ezell said that 85 percent of the applicants so far were from Hispanic countries, and that 95 percent of them were Catholic.

Fear Is Hard to Overcome

Despite assurances from government and **church**, thousands of potentially eligible have been reluctant or slow to come forward.

One is a 30-year-old Guatemalan woman, who says she has lived in Chicago, Indio, Calif., and Los Angeles since 1988 with her husband. They have two American-born children. She said the couple had not applied because they could not afford the fees, \$185 for each adult, \$420 maximum for a family. Her husband was recently laid off, she said.

"At times I feel like I'm in an alleyway without any way out," the woman said.

Others are fearful that some family members will qualify and others not. Ernest Gustafson, district director for Los Angeles of the Immigration Service, said that the agency had not yet separated any families. By using the "personal discretion" available to the agency in hardship cases, he said, close family members with eligible persons had been granted "extended voluntary departure" status, a provision that allows an emigrant to remain legally at least for a time.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); RELIGION (92%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (90%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); **AMNESTY** (89%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); TRENDS (71%)

Company: IMMIGRATION SERVICE (65%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US); ROMAN CATHOLIC **CHURCH** IMMIGRATION SERVICE (65%); ROMAN CATHOLIC **CHURCH** IMMIGRATION SERVICE (65%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US); ROMAN CATHOLIC **CHURCH** IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); ROMAN CATHOLIC **CHURCH** IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%)

Industry: HOTELS & MOTELS (70%); AIRPORTS (50%)

Geographic: LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (93%); CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); NEVADA, USA (79%); HAWAII, USA (79%); **UNITED STATES** (92%)