

## ***Is the Catholic Church pro-immigrant? You bet.; Its stance is in line with the history and tradition of the faith***

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### **Body**

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The **Catholic Church** -- an unrelenting opponent of abortion and homosexuality and troubled by its own priest-abuse scandals -- has been called many things, but fashionable isn't often among them. Yet fashion is why some critics now speculate the **church** has involved itself in today's third rail of politics: immigration reform. The chorus has been steady and building. A sampling:

\*Rep. Pete King, R-N.Y., a Roman **Catholic** and chairman of the House of Representatives' Homeland Security Committee, told Fox's Bill O'Reilly earlier this year, "This has become the politically correct tune. ... Too many people in the **Catholic Church** have signed onto this. It's fashionable."

\*Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., a leading opponent of illegal immigration, has blamed the **church's stance** on "left-leaning religious activists."

\*CNN's Lou Dobbs has accused the **church** of avidly looking south of the border just "to add a few folks to those pews."

Where does the **church** stand on the current debate? While the Vatican has articulated a broad vision of immigration through the years, it has largely deferred to the bishops' conferences in each country on specific public policy efforts. In the USA, the **church** favors the Senate's more moderate legislation over the House's heavy-handed enforcement-only approach. Both bills are stalled, but immigration is expected to be a prominent issue once Congress returns from its summer recess.

And by 2020, the **church** projects that more than half of its members will have Spanish surnames.

While Tancredo Republicans and Dobbs protectionists speculate that the **church** wants immigration reform simply because it is fashionable politics or is a way to put more people in the pews, there is a much larger and longer standing **Catholic** case for migration. The U.S. **Catholic Church** was founded by and for **immigrants**, and it sees today's nativist grumblings as the same that confronted the American **church** in its earliest years.

"We are relearning what it means to be an **immigrant church**," says Mark Franken, head of migration and refugee services for the U.S. Conference of **Catholic** Bishops (USCCB). "There are just a lot of people unaware of both the theological dimension for migration, and also our **history** in this country."

Brought to America by Spanish and French explorers, Catholicism accounted for 1% of the population in the 13 colonies in 1776, according to the Archdiocese of St. Louis. By the end of the 19th century, the **Catholic** population had swelled, and anti-**immigrant** sentiment had emerged as Irish and other newcomers had dramatically changed the **church's** face. In 1920, three of four U.S. **Catholics** were **immigrants**, and it is for these **immigrants** that the **church** created its vast network of schools, charities and hospitals.

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Today, the **Catholic Church** is America's largest with 69 million members, roughly four times the size of the second-largest, the Southern Baptist Convention. It credits the vast majority of its growth in the USA over the past four decades to this nation's ever-increasing Hispanic population.

For the **church**, the migrant's plight is a universal one tracing back to the Holy Family. Pope Pius XII, in 1952, declared the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph to be the archetype of every refugee family. He based this on their flight into Egypt, calling them "the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil."

The **church** has emphasized the duty of Christians to "welcome the stranger," citing the commandment in the book of Leviticus that "you shall treat the stranger no differently than the natives born among you." The **church** also points to Jesus' description of the final judgment, when those who welcomed him in the form of a stranger inherit the kingdom of heaven.

"The biblical **tradition** puts the migrant and exile at the very center of concern. Therefore, we, as believers and followers of Jesus, can do no less," the USCCB's Franken told a Lutheran gathering in 2004.

Even the **church's** language is rooted in migration. The word "parishioner," for instance, is related to the Greek word paroikos, which means "wayfarer" or "sojourner." A parish, then, is a community of migrants, and migration itself is a metaphor for humanity, as all people pass through life on the way to their final destination back to God.

Consistent advocacy

The bishops' call for "just and humane" immigration reform is no different from what the **church's** leaders have advocated: from Pope John XXIII -- who said, "Every human being has the right to freedom of movement" -- to Pope John Paul II, who in an annual message for World Migration Day in 1995 said, "The illegal migrant comes before us like that 'stranger' in whom Jesus asks to be recognized," and **Catholics** must help these strangers "whatever their legal status with regard to state law."

If the **Catholic Church** has wound up on the politically correct side of today's debate, it certainly took a more principled and traditional route than its skeptics avow.

Paulette Chu Miniter lives in New York and is a fellow at the Phillips Foundation, a non-profit public affairs organization.

Immigration, Catholicism and America

1600s: In original English colonies, Roman **Catholics** are persecuted for their beliefs.

1632: King Charles I issues a charter to Cecilius Calvert, baron of Baltimore, to settle Maryland. Calvert encourages religious toleration for all Christians, permitting **Catholics** to practice freely.

1704: Anti-**Catholic** legislation is enacted in Maryland with the aim of restricting the work of Jesuits.

1776: **Catholics** make up only 1% of the colonial population.

1820-1920: 4.3 million largely Irish **Catholic immigrants** settle in the USA. More than 1.5 million German **Catholics** immigrate to the country.

1832: U.S. Congress chooses **Catholic** priest as its chaplain.

1845: Irish immigration surges amid Ireland's potato blight.

1880-1920: Millions of Italians -- nearly all **Catholic** -- immigrate to the USA.

1880-1930: More than 2 million Polish **immigrants**, the majority **Catholic**, enter the USA.

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1906: **Catholics**, 17% of the U.S. population, are the country's largest religious denomination.

1910: Start of Mexican Revolution prompts more than 680,000 Mexicans to enter the USA over decades.

1928: Alfred E. Smith becomes the first **Catholic** presidential candidate.

1940-60: More than 545,000 Puerto Ricans move to the U.S. mainland.

1952: Pope Pius XII issues Exsul Familia (Families in Exile), the "Magna Carta for Migrants." In it, the pope says: "The emigre Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family."

1960: John F. Kennedy is elected as the first **Catholic** U.S. president.

1970s: Hispanics from war-torn Central American nations seek haven in the USA. Exodus continues into the '90s.

1972: U.S. Conference of **Catholic** Bishops (USCCB) sponsors the I Encuentro Nacional Hispano de Pastoral, a nationwide gathering designed to help Hispanics share ideas to help their communities.

1999: USCCB reports that since 1960, the **Catholic Church** has grown by 71%, largely because of Hispanic influx.

2003: Census reports Hispanic Americans have overtaken African-Americans as the nation's largest minority community.

2005: U.S. bishops launch national campaign to expand and strengthen **immigrant** rights.

2006: The **Catholic Church** lends a voice to the immigration debate. Priests and parishioners advocate legalization for illegal **immigrants**. **Catholics** make up 23% of U.S. population, according to USCCB.

USA TODAY research by Victoria Shapiro

## Graphic

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