

Week #3

The treatment of immigrants throughout U.S. history

This week, the (Insert Name of Parish/Institution) Circle of Support continues its series of articles on the topic of immigration in our country. This is made all the more timely in the light of the inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden and the resulting changes in the Administration's leadership. To help provide a historical perspective, the attached summary offers a brief overview of U.S. immigration laws and policies since the mid-19th century, and invites you to consider getting involved by advocating for social justice for immigrants. We close with a powerful quote from the Catholic Bishop of El Paso, the Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz, DD.

The United States has long been considered a nation of immigrants. Historically, attitudes towards new immigrants have vacillated between welcoming and exclusionary. Following is a brief summary of some of the key events and laws regarding immigration in the U.S.

1849 - 1860: The Know Nothing political party opposed immigrants, primarily Irish and Germans at the time, and anyone who was Roman Catholic. Party members harassed and spread political propaganda against their targeted populations. This was designed to curtail any political influence of Catholics and other immigrant groups.

1882: The Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. Anti-Chinese sentiments grew as Chinese laborers (only 0.002% of the U.S. population at the time) became successful in America. White workers blamed them for their low wages. The 1882 Act was the first in American history to place broad restrictions on certain immigrant groups.

1942 - 1964: The Bracero Program allowed Mexicans to enter the U.S. as temporary seasonal workers. Exposure to substandard working conditions and wage discrimination eventually led to the program's termination. American farmers, however, continued to recruit Mexican workers illegally.

1952 - 1965: The Immigration and Nationality Act was enacted in 1952. It was substantially revised in 1965 (the Hart-Cellars Act), thus doing away with the National Origins Quota, among other significant changes. The Hart-Cellars Act eliminated nationality as a selection factor for immigrants, and admission was then based on family ties, desirable job skills or education.

1986: The Simpson-Mazzoli Act was signed and granted amnesty to more than 3 million immigrants living illegally in the U.S.

2003: The entire Department of Homeland Security was created in 2003 along with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) for the purpose of enforcing U.S. immigration laws, thus replacing the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

2005 - 2014: Several comprehensive immigration bills stalled in Congress despite support from presidents Bush and Obama.

2012: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was approved, which gave some undocumented youth work authorization and relief from deportation. At the time, this program did not provide legal status or a path to citizenship.

2017 – 2020: An attempt by the Trump Administration was initiated to end the DACA policy, and a proposal was put forth to build a Border Wall with Mexico. In 2018, the Trump Administration enacted a zero-tolerance policy for illegal border crossings, which led to mass detentions and separation of children from their parents. It is estimated more than 600 children still remain separated from their parents.

Today, many of us witness the harmful cumulative effects that decades-long exclusionary immigration laws have had on our country's millions of undocumented brothers and sisters. We have a choice as a nation to repeat the mistakes of our past with unwelcoming and restrictive immigration laws, or we can advocate for more sensible and humane immigration policies as we begin a new Administration and the balance of power shifts in the Legislature.

As followers of Christ, we are called to welcome and love the immigrant as ourselves. The words of Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso challenge us to question U.S. immigration policies in light of our Christian faith.

As a Catholic and Christian leader on the border, I am often called to be a doctor of the soul. Standing here at the U.S.-Mexico border, how do we begin to diagnose the soul of our country?

A government and society which view fleeing children and families as threats; a government which treats children in U.S. custody worse than animals; a government and society who turn their backs on pregnant mothers, babies and families and make them wait in Ciudad Juarez without a thought to the crushing consequences on this challenged city. ... This government and this society are not well. We suffer from a life-threatening case of hardening of the heart.

The Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz, DD, Bishop of El Paso, Texas
Reflection on Psalm 95, Give Us This Day, January 14, 2020.

What can we do?

Please visit the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' ***Justice for Immigrants*** website for information on how you can advocate for change.