

After Minneapolis, we need a way forward

Archbishop José H. Gomez

I am deeply troubled by the violence in Minneapolis and the ongoing climate of fear and uncertainty here in Los Angeles and in cities across the country, as federal immigration enforcement actions continue.

As a pastor, my heart aches for our people and for our country.

We pray for those who have lost their lives or been injured. We pray for the safety of our law enforcement officers, and for wisdom for our leaders. We pray especially for our immigrant brothers and sisters, who are powerless and caught in the middle of this struggle, living in fear for their futures.

The country cannot go on like this. The first task is to restore order and peace to our streets, and insist on calm and restraint in our public discourse.

In the wake of last weekend's tragedy, I hope all sides in this conflict — federal authorities, city and state officials, and those protesting the enforcement actions — will take a step back in the interests of the common good. We are caught in a dangerous pattern of angry rhetoric, provocations, and violence. It needs to stop.

There is no question that the federal government has the duty to enforce immigration laws. But there must be a better way than this.

One place to start is for our leaders in Washington to limit deportations to violent criminals or those guilty of other serious offenses.

It serves no national interest to deport undocumented men and women who are contributing to the good of our society, it only leaves children without their parents. Surely, we can find another way to hold these men and women accountable for breaking our laws.

America celebrates her 250th anniversary this year, and while it is hard to say this, what's happening now seems to be moving us away from the values of our nation's founding.

America was the first nation to be established on the belief that human rights come from God and that the government's purpose is to protect these rights — to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The words of our Declaration of Independence do not distinguish — it says “all” men and women are created equal. Our rights do not depend on the decisions of government officials or law enforcement officers; we do not lose our rights based on the color of our skin, or the language we speak, or for not having the proper documents.

Right now our government seems to be treating undocumented immigrants — men, women, and children — as if they have no rights. That should not be happening.

The root cause of the current crisis is the country's broken immigration system. Our leaders have done little in nearly 40 years to try to reform our immigration laws. Even today, with our cities in turmoil, no one in Washington is talking seriously about this.

There is a bipartisan bill in Congress, it's not perfect, it has flaws, but it is realistic about the political landscape and it should be the beginning of a conversation.

Called the Dignity Act (H.R. 4333), the bill would reform the visa and asylum processes, tighten border security and enforcement measures, and establish a mandatory, nationwide electronic verification system for employers; it would provide a path to a legal status for the millions of undocumented people who have been living and working in the country for five years or more, and also a path to citizenship for the 2.5 million "Dreamers."

The bill holds undocumented immigrants accountable for breaking federal law, requiring them to undergo a criminal background check, pay back taxes they owe, and it imposes a stiff penalty fee.

The bill would also sharply limit enforcement actions at "sensitive locations" such as churches, hospitals, schools, and courthouses.

For me there is much to improve in this legislation, but it is a genuine, good-faith starting point. And we need to start somewhere. And we need to start now.

The Dignity Act was introduced last summer, but still no hearings have been held. I hope that changes soon.

Going forward, it is time for us to get back to the first principles of our nation. We are a nation under God, and we are in this together. We need to remember that.

God created us in his image and we need to treat other people like we believe that. Even if we are on opposite sides, we need to talk and listen to one another with respect and with hearts open to trying to understand the other side and to work together to seek the common good.

Pray for me and I will pray for you, and let us pray for our country.

May our Blessed Mother Mary intercede for us and bring our leaders together to find a solution and way forward out of this crisis.