

# The Archbishop's Letters

September 8, 2006 – Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

TO CHRIST'S FAITHFUL OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS:

**ON WELCOMING THE STRANGER:  
THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE IN THE PRESENT DEBATE  
OVER THE REFORM OF IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. Some days ago, on Labor Day, we took time off from work, in order to celebrate work as God's gift to us. We celebrated our stewardship of God's manifold gifts through work, so that we may serve the good of all. We honored all workers who, no matter how significant or insignificant their work may seem, contribute to the good of all by carrying out, to the best of their abilities, their service.

2. This year, the celebration of Labor Day was marked by serious concern, and even tension, over the reform of our nation's legislation regarding immigration. The concern and, indeed, tension has been heightened for us by the action of one municipality in the Archdiocese, which has taken the matter of immigration legislation, rightly reserved to the federal government, into its own hands.

3. Seemingly, all agree that the present legislation on immigration does not work. Understandably, there is a diversity of opinion about how the government should reform our legislation, in order to deal with the widespread phenomenon of illegal immigration. As Christians, no matter what may be our disagreements about specific aspects of the law on immigration, we must be united in obedience to the Word of God, which teaches us to receive the stranger into our midst as one of our own.

4. The Word of God reminds us that we are all strangers and guests in the world. We are all pilgrims on the way to our lasting home with God. Recall the command which God gives us in the *Book of Leviticus*:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (*Lv 19:33-34*).

Our Lord Jesus confirms the commandment, identifying Himself, God the Son Incarnate, with the stranger whom He instructs us to welcome. He emphatically declares to us: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt 25:40*). For us who are citizens of the United States of America, it should not be difficult to understand God's law regarding the stranger and immigrant, for the great majority of us are descendants of those who came as

strangers to our country, seeking a better life and a secure home. We should not easily forget what it meant for our ancestors to be immigrants. All immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, are our brothers and sisters. We are to respect and love them.

**5.** As our nation addresses the present situation of widespread unauthorized immigration, the Church, obedient to the Word of God, helps us to understand how we as Christian citizens should respond. In order to assist everyone in the Archdiocese to reflect upon his or her response, I review the principles of a respectful and loving Christian response.

**6.** First of all, the Church urges reform of our immigration laws which leave so many in the shadows of unauthorized immigration and have resulted in the loss of life for many who were honestly searching for a life with a future and a secure home. The shadows of unauthorized immigration sadly provide ample place for the exploitation of brothers and sisters in their great need of our help.

**7.** Without in any way condoning unauthorized immigration, the Church asks that the reform of our laws recognize immigrants who, although irregular in immigration status, are contributing to the good of our nation by their decent life and hard work, and provide them the opportunity to regularize their status. At the same time, the Church asks that our immigration laws make it possible for individuals and families, desiring to enter our country in pursuit of a better life and a secure home, to pursue their honest desire with their human rights honored and safeguarded.

**8.** Recognizing the family as the first unit of life in society, the Church asks that legislation regulating immigration favor the unification of families. At present, many families of immigrants must wait for years to be reunited.

**9.** As Christian citizens, we must uphold the rule of law, especially as it pertains to the security of the citizens of our nation. Border protection policies must be in place to permit the identification of criminals and terrorists who seek to enter our country. These policies must be focused, proportional and humane. Furthermore, their implementation must respect the inviolable human dignity of every brother and sister.

**10.** Finally, in our discussion of the reform of immigration legislation, the Church teaches us that respect is owed toward all. To make undocumented immigrants the scapegoats of the economic and political troubles in our nation is not just. It is profoundly unjust to place the responsibility for acts of terrorism, perpetrated by a few criminals, at the door of immigrants who are working hard to serve us, while seeking a basic livelihood for themselves and their families. Before the great challenge of developing new legislation regarding immigration, our nation must be attentive to the dignity of each and every human life, never overlooking the divine mandate to assist individual immigrants in attaining legal status and preserving the unity of their families.

**11.** As Christian citizens, practicing the virtue of patriotism, let us pray that our nation's laws regarding immigration will serve justice towards all, immigrants and citizens of the United States of America, and, therefore, serve the common good. Let us be tireless in welcoming the stranger into our midst with Christlike respect and love.

**12.** May Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America and Star of the New Evangelization, hold us all in her loving arms. May she lead us to her Divine Son Who teaches us the way of divine love.

Asking God's blessing upon you and your homes, and counting upon a remembrance in your prayers, I remain

Yours devotedly in Christ,

(Most Rev.) Raymond L. Burke  
Archbishop of St. Louis