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DENVER CATHOLIC REGISTER

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Archbishop's column



On Christmas, compassion and immigration reform

At Christmas every year, the Gospel reminds us that Mary and Joseph found no room at the inn, Jesus was born in a stable, and he lived his earliest years as a refugee. The real Christmas story has very little to do with expensive presents. It has everything to do with God's mercy and our mission of sharing that mercy with others.

A family I know has a son named Robert. Robert was born in Juarez, Mexico. He's 17 years old, and he'll graduate from a Denver public high school next spring. An excellent student, he hopes one day to become a physician. He works hard. He's well liked by his fellow students and teachers. He has friends of all races.

Robert was 3 years old when his parents crossed the border into the United States. His parents arrived without papers and brought their family along. They set down roots and raised Robert well. Like his parents, he's undocumented, but he speaks English better than Spanish. He's proud of the values of this country and feels, speaks, and lives as an American. In fact, he identifies himself more as an American than as a Mexican.

Unfortunately, some months ago Robert discovered that because of his "illegal" status, he won't be able to attend college. He doesn't have a social security number. Therefore he can't get student financial assistance. So it really doesn't matter how smart or dedicated he is.

Robert is a real person. There's nothing imaginary or overstated about his dilemma. It's bitterly concrete, and it could have lifelong consequences. Like Robert, many other undocumented young people — and not only Hispanics — see their dreams of contributing to this country come crashing down, despite their talent and energy.

Current U.S. immigration laws lead them to fail. In effect, we penalize innocent young people for an illegal act committed by someone else, and often winked at by

businesses and local law enforcement authorities — someone usually willing to work the tough, unseemly jobs and seeking no more than a chance to build a better life. This doesn't make sense. Wouldn't it be more productive for American society to accept these young people and give them a chance to succeed?

Under current legislation, an undocumented student is — in effect — limited to finishing only high school. In practice, he has few opportunities for further education in the United States, which is the equivalent of a career death sentence. Nor does it matter if he's talented, virtuous and willing to change his life. Without proof of legal status, there's no legal employment, no student loans and therefore no college.

Fortunately, two initiatives, one at the state level and another under national discussion, would open opportunities for a better life to young people like Robert. In Colorado, a push for "in-state tuition" would allow undocumented students to pay in-state resident tuition. For many, that would put a college degree within financial reach. And, at the national level, the Dream Act would allow those students who meet certain requirements to obtain legal residency in order to pursue their education and contribute positively to the life and greatness of this country.

As Catholics, we need to think seriously about the human cost of the continuing immigration debate. That doesn't mean we should be somber at Christmas this year, or refuse the joy at the center of Christ's birth — in fact, just the opposite. The real glory of Christmas is the fact of God's compassion toward all of us. He loved us enough to send us his Son. No gift could be greater. He now invites us to deepen that gift by sharing it with others. How we choose to do that, of course, is up to each of us. For me, it seems obvious that we're all better off having persons like Robert among us — and at school, growing and contributing according to their talents.

Immigration reform can be as complex as it is urgent. Good people can legitimately disagree and take very different approaches to the issue. Throwing open our borders and ignoring national security concerns is not the answer. No one can reasonably dispute that. We need to respect and obey the law. But we also need laws that are sensible, humane and just. The dilemma of young people like Robert doesn't seem sensible, or humane, or just.

Surely we can find some way to help young people like Robert make a decent life among us, and still protect the safety of the country we call home, and love. This is a task that awaits us in 2006. As we begin our celebrations this year, let's remember what God really accomplished at the first Christmas, and how deeply he still loves us. And may God grant us all a holy Christmas season, and a new year filled with his presence.

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