WCC Backs Major Immigration Reform

In a June 20 letter, Wisconsin’s bishops urged Catholics in the state to contact members of Congress in support of pending legislation to reform the nation’s immigration system. A week later, the Senate passed S.744, “The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act.” The House is currently drafting its own legislation.

The bishops cited three questions posed by Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration:

• Do we want a country with a permanent underclass, without the same rights as the majority?

• Do we want to continue to separate children from parents, creating a generation of young U.S. citizens who are suspicious and fearful of their government?

• Do we want a nation that accepts the toil and taxes of undocumented workers without offering them the protection of the law?

The answer to these questions, of course, is a resounding “no.”

“Therefore,” Wisconsin’s bishops wrote, “we ask that you contact your Senators and Representatives, urging them to vote in favor of S.744. While the bill is not perfect, we look forward to working with our elected officials to achieve the most humane legislation possible.”

WCC Executive Director John Huebscher spoke in favor of comprehensive immigration reform as part of a panel discussion in Wausau on August 14. The panel was organized as part of a Bibles, Badges, and Business campaign that emphasizes support for reform among religious groups, law enforcement, and business leaders.

In his presentation, Huebscher identified support for immigration as “central to our understanding of who we are as people of faith.” He noted that we are called to be concerned with each other’s welfare and this is especially true of those at the margins of society.

“In future immigration policy should reflect the best of our history as a nation of immigrants. It should be governed by our nation’s moral and social heritage as a place that welcomes immigrants even if they come to us as ‘tired, poor, huddled masses,’” he added.
When the WCC offers testimony, we often use secular language to reach an audience that includes many non-Catholics. But we never forget the Gospel values that provide the foundation of our position.

The debate over immigration reform is a case in point.

One of the major issues in the debate is whether reform should include a “path to citizenship.” Many people of good will believe that it is unjust to create such a path for immigrants who broke the law when they entered this country illegally.

One way we can respond to that concern is to recall what the Church has to say about the mercy of God.

In his encyclical Deus caritas est (God is Love), Pope Benedict taught that God’s love for his people is a forgiving love. As he expressed it, “It is so great it turns God against himself, his love against his justice.”

We can also look to the well-known reference to John 3:16 and recall that God sent His son to be our Savior, because he loved us, not because we humans are always good or always obey the law, or because we always play by the rules, or because we deserve it.

Another example is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The master paid those who labored one hour a full days’ wage because he knew that’s what they needed to live. Such kindness was more important than being “just” and paying for the one hour they worked.

The lesson in these examples is not that rules don’t matter or that there are no consequences for breaking them. Rather, the message is that when making “close calls” that require us to weigh different values, the Gospel calls us to let love of human beings trump a harsh justice or a rigid rule that places undue burdens on the vulnerable.

That’s one reason the bishops of the U.S. want immigration reform: to offer a path to citizenship that is manageable, not insurmountable.

The WCC is supporting a proposal offered by a bipartisan group of legislators that would return first-time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. The bill reverses some of the changes enacted in 1995, which reduced the age at which a person is considered an adult for purposes of prosecution from 18 to 17.

Under the proposal, co-authored by Senator Jerry Petrowski (R-Mosinee), Representative Garry Bies (R-Sister Bay), and Representative Fred Kessler (D-Milwaukee), 17-year-olds who commit serious offenses or have a prior criminal record would still be handled in the adult justice system. The bill also allows for a 17-year-old to be waived to adult court if it is determined to be appropriate by the court.

The vast majority of arrests of 17-year-olds, however, are for relatively minor, nonviolent offenses. Specifically, only about one in 20 arrests of 17-year-olds were for a serious crime, and only about one in 50 arrests were for offenses classified as violent.

A diverse group of individuals and organizations support the bill, including former Governor Tommy Thompson, who signed the 1995 changes into law, and former Governor Jim Doyle, who was Attorney General at that time. In addition to the WCC, other organizations backing the measure include: the Wisconsin Association of Family and Children’s Agencies, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the State Bar of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the National Association of Social Workers (WI Chapter), Disability Rights Wisconsin, WISDOM, and Wisconsin Family Ties.

Recently, legislatures in Connecticut and Illinois have enacted similar legislation. When those laws take effect, Wisconsin will be one of only 11 states that automatically treat youth under 18 as adults.

The authors hope the bill can be scheduled for a hearing later this month.
WCC Supports Pro-Life Bills

In early June, the WCC testified in support of three pro-life bills. Senate Bill 206 (Sen. Mary Lazich, R-New Berlin) was signed into law by Governor Walker as 2013 Wisconsin Act 37. The new law requires that abortionists perform or arrange to perform an ultrasound and provide a medical explanation of the images for a woman who is scheduled to have an abortion.

A second provision of the law requires that abortionists have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles of an abortion clinic. While the ultrasound requirement went into effect on July 8, U.S. District Judge William Conley has placed a temporary restraining order on the admitting privileges requirement. Judge Conley will conduct a trial on this provision on November 25.

The WCC also testified on two other bills which have passed in the Assembly but have yet to pass out of committee in the Senate. Senate Bill 201, “The Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act” (Sen. Joe Leibham, R-Sheboygan), would prohibit abortion providers from knowingly performing sex-selective abortions. Senate Bill 202, “The Health Care Conscience Act” (Sen. Glenn Grothman, R-West Bend), would provide religious entities that have a moral objection to purchasing coverage for contraceptive services the same protection under Wisconsin law as provided for under the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). The bill would also prohibit funds held by public authorities from being used to subsidize the performance of abortions.

Thousands of Families Seek Vouchers in New Program

Recently, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) completed the first ever random selection of students eligible to participate in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP). The WPCP is a new statewide program that provides vouchers of up to $4,442 to students in families with incomes up to 185 percent of federal poverty level ($43,752 for a family four). The parents then use the voucher to pay for education at participating private schools. The expansion of the voucher program was part of the biennial state budget act (2013 Wisconsin Act 20), which limited participation to 500 students in this introductory year.

Schools, or systems of schools, had to submit application materials by July 26, 2013, in order to be eligible to participate in the program. Forty-eight private school organizations representing 90 schools applied. These schools received a combined 2,415 eligible student applications. Once student applications topped 500, the law directs that participation be limited to the top 25 schools or systems that received the most eligible student applications during the August 1 through 9 application period. As a result of this process, DPI announced the 25 private school organizations representing 64 schools that may participate in the program this year. DPI notified these schools as to which students were selected for voucher enrollment in late August.

Seventeen of the 25 private school organizations are Catholic, representing 55 schools. Saint Francis Xavier Catholic School System Inc. in Appleton, Wisconsin, received the most applicants with 193 applications, 55 of whom were chosen as voucher recipients. In the Green Bay and De Pere area, the Green Bay Area Catholic Education (GRACE) system applied to participate in the program as three regional entities – GRACE East, GRACE South, and GRACE West. These entities received a combined total of 236 applications. In addition to Appleton and the Green Bay area, Catholic schools serving students in and around Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Kenosha, La Crosse, Manitowoc, Marshfield, Stevens Point, Wausau, and Wisconsin Rapids will participate in the program this year.

Next year, up to 1,000 students may participate in the program. A number of schools have already indicated their interest in joining the program for the 2014-2015 school year.
For up-to-date information, join the WCC’s free e-advocacy network and get the bi-weekly *Capitol Update.*

Visit [www.wisconsincatholic.org](http://www.wisconsincatholic.org) to sign up!

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**CAPITOL REPORT** is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC’s activities and positions on state and federal legislation.

**WCC Staff**

John Huebscher, Executive Director
Cathy Coyle-Kaufmann, Admin. Assistant
Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life/Social Concerns
Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Education/Health Care

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**At Urging of WCC and Others, Governor Vetoes Bail Bond Provision in Budget**

In response to requests from the WCC and others, Governor Scott Walker vetoed a provision in the state budget that would have allowed commercial bail bonding in Wisconsin.

In a June 26 letter to the Governor, WCC Executive Director John Huebscher noted that in their statement on crime and punishment in Wisconsin, the state’s Catholic bishops wrote: “Criminal justice policies . . . must ensure that justice is as accessible to victims and offenders who are poor as it is to those who are more affluent.”

“The bail bonding provision undermines this principle in several important respects,” Huebscher wrote.

Huebscher also argued that tying bail to a private business transaction will profit the bondsmen, while those of limited means who cannot afford the bond languish in jail awaiting trial.

“Our government should not enable some people to get rich at the expense of others’ freedom,” he asserted.

The letter noted that under the current system, defendants who are found innocent are entitled to a full refund of their bail. By contrast, the amount paid to the commercial bail bondsman can never be reclaimed. This imposes an added and completely unnecessary financial burden on the poorest members of our community. Because these defendants can only post cash, they must lose a portion of it, even if they are completely innocent.

In his veto message the Governor cited his concern about the provision’s negative effect on payment of restitution to victims and law enforcement programs. He also noted that policy is best addressed not in the state budget, but in separate legislation that will allow for more study and public input.