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Joint Statement of the Missouri Bishops
on Immigration
January 28, 2008

Dear Governor, Statewide Officials and State Legislators:

As the 2008 session of the Missouri General Assembly convenes, we take notice that many bills have been filed relating to immigration, while some political candidates vie to see who can be tougher on illegal immigrants. We are deeply troubled by the tone and substance of this debate and urge a new and more positive discussion of immigration-related concerns and how our state might best address these issues.

In the Gospel according to Luke a lawyer, seeking to justify himself and limit his moral responsibility, asked Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied by telling the story of the Good Samaritan who, unlike the priest and Levite, is moved with compassion to stop along his journey to care for a victim of robbery who has been stripped, beaten and left half dead. (Lk 10: 25-37). The Samaritan recognizes his neighbor.

In Matthew's Gospel the interlocutors failed to recognize Jesus in the less fortunate and asked "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink." (Mt 25: 31-46). Most illegal immigrants come from countries where poverty is deep and pervasive. In rural Mexico and Central America many families subsist on one dollar a day or less. The poverty is so severe that people leave their families and homes and even risk death to come to our country. They come to find work and to send money back home to their families. Would we, in their shoes, not do the same?

While respecting the need for national boundaries and orderly migration, the Catholic Church recognizes that each person has a basic human right to migrate when faced with circumstances such as persecution, drought, famine or pervasive poverty. In recognizing this basic human right, the Catholic Church joins with many other churches and organizations in reaching out to immigrants, both legal and undocumented, to provide legal, pastoral, social and emotional support. But this is not solely a responsibility of churches, but of all of society. In this regard, we are reminded of the admonition in the Book of Leviticus: "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." (Lv 19: 34).

The current federal immigration system is badly in need of reform. There is a large backlog of pending visa applications, and the federal government often takes years to process individual applications. Applicants often wait for years before they can join the rest of their family in the United States. Even though employers in agriculture, food processing and the domestic service industry have great need for unskilled labor, very few visas are granted for unskilled workers. Despite the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with its

promise of greater economic integration and prosperity for the nations of this continent, great disparities in wealth remain between the U.S. and Mexico , spurring a steady migration into our country.

Some have expressed frustration waiting for the federal government to address these issues, but premature action by states and localities will do more harm than good. Requiring local officials to enforce federal immigration laws will discourage immigrants from reporting crimes thereby endangering the entire community. Government intrusion into religious ministries will undermine pastoral and humanitarian aid to immigrants, both legal and undocumented; and it will also spur a host of problems for local communities, such as creating more homelessness. Aggressive campaigns to round up unauthorized immigrants can lead to racial profiling by individuals and businesses seeking to avoid government intrusion and create ethnic tensions in our communities.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have joined with many others in calling for comprehensive reform of our nation's immigration laws. First, our country must seek to mitigate the causes of international migration by working with poorer nations to improve the economic and living conditions of their citizens. Second, we must recognize that it is neither humane nor practical to deport the estimated 12 million unauthorized immigrants already within our borders. Our country should establish a process whereby immigrants can earn their citizenship. Our immigration allotments need to be more realistic and meet the labor demand of U.S. businesses. By undertaking these steps, our country can replace illegal immigration with an orderly and legal immigration that can improve the ability of government to track people who may truly pose a threat to our national security.

These steps are appropriately addressed by federal legislation and policy rather than by piecemeal enactments by the states. But there are steps that Missouri can take, too. We favor adequate funding to help people learn to speak, read, and write English. We recommend allowing in-state tuition rates for the children of unauthorized immigrants. These children have been brought into our state by their parents or others. They have attended our elementary and secondary schools. We should not turn our backs on them because they lack legal status through no fault of their own. Our state should also offer basic humanitarian assistance, such as food and health care, without regard to legal status.

While you consider immigration policies in the 2008 session of the Missouri General Assembly, we ask that you recall the compassionate response of the Good Samaritan. Our laws and policies should be designed to encourage charity like that offered by the Good Samaritan and thereby further the common good of our state.

Yours in Christ,

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