An Archbishop's View on Immigration and Social Justice

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A high authority in the Catholic Church in Los Angeles, where he is a well-known outspoken activist on immigration, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, visited DePaul University for a day during Fall term 2012. He had been invited for activities in commemoration of Hispanic Heritage Month. He delivered the fourth annual Archbishop Oscar Romero Latino Breakfast Speech, organized by the Center for Intercultural Programs in the Student Center, and then spent the day traveling between the University’s two campuses in the Loop and Lincoln Park, to participate in conversation groups and panels.

Now retired from the Los Angeles Archdiocese, Mahony has stated that his new vocation will be to advocate full-time for the cause of undocumented immigrants, and to initiatives toward their legal residency status.

The DePaul Breakfast was attended by more than a hundred faculty, staff and students. Mahony’s words tiptoed between poetry and politics, as he peppered his talk with immigration figures, citations from Oscar Romero’s historic sermons (with pauses to add his own social commentary), and his views on the Catholic Church’s urgent need to help marginalized immigrant groups. He encouraged the group to understand that, “we cannot do everything, but it (the Church) compels us to do something.” As he recited the eloquent words of the martyred Salvadoran archbishop, the clinking silverware remained silent and inspired eyes clung to his every word.

Linking the struggle for social justice in 1980s El Salvador to that of the extensive population in the U.S. called “illegal,” Mahony drew from observations during his many years of social service in Los Angeles. The Archbishop Emeritus made it clear that the Church, its educational institutions, and everyone in this country, stand to gain from comprehensive immigration reform. He proclaimed the issue of immigrant rights “the Civil Rights issue” of this generation.

After the breakfast, he attended a brief Catholic mass in the St. Louise de Marillac campus chapel. In the afternoon, he commuted to the Loop campus to address a group from the DePaul Law School. In his talk titled, For I was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me, he applied Biblical foundations, Catholic Church and Catholic higher education principles to the need for immigration reform, supplementing these with a historical review of immigrant arrivals to the U.S. He then concluded with five key elements to arrive at a solution for legalizing those in residence. First, facts must be separated from myths by understanding the history of immigrants in the U.S.; second, there needs to be a personal connection with immigrant families to understand their stories; third, immigrants and their children must be humanized; fourth, the immigrant activist community must shift the emphasis toward the future, to work toward the fifth and final element: working for, and urging, immigration policy reform at the federal level.

As Mahony put it, “people want to stay home,” thus efforts by home countries must become part of the larger solution. He stated that people often have and should be able to migrate to provide a better life for their families, echoing the stance taken by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “that migration should be driven by choice not necessity.” The Cardinal conceded that “nations have the right to protect their borders,” but that it should be done in a measured and succinct manner with greater concentration on actual threats to national security. He stressed the need for a practice of providing asylum for refugees, reiterating the importance of recognizing the human rights and dignity of populations: to bring focus to “reuniting families, not separating them.”

His address met some skepticism in the room of future litigators. One unconvinced student expressed a lack of faith in the ability of politicians to solve this issue, stating that, “politicians nowadays only care about getting reelected. They never listen to the people.” Mahony responded with various examples in which social justice advocacy brought changes to government policy. As the event concluded, the question-and-answer portion quickly turned into a heated debate among audience members, which was made up of current and past DePaul Law School students, as well as a few faculty members.

For the final event of the day, What Must Be Done?: Immigration and You, Mahony addressed a younger group,
undergraduates in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Preceding the Cardinal at the podium was a young man identifying himself as an undocumented college graduate: standing firmly behind a podium that seemed to tower over him, he provided a personal testimonial of overcoming obstacles to complete his degree. Now an activist and community organizer in a Chicago Southside working-class Latino neighborhood, the speaker implored the need for comprehensive immigration reform. He was well received by the audience; the small group of students clapped as he reciprocated the applause with a warm smile.

Mahony gave a condensed version of his earlier talk to the undergraduates. Adding a timely anecdote to highlight the need for an official doctrine from the Church’s highest office to find a solution to the immigration issue in the U.S., Mahony described a brief encounter with the earthly leader of the Catholic Church: “‘The Pope asked me, ‘what suggestions do you have on the matter?’ and I said ‘well, I just happen to have a draft right here in my pocket.’ I pulled it out and handed it to him.’” The story made the twenty some-odd twenty-somethings laugh out loud, literally, loudly. In this manner, Mahony reached the young college students, compelling them to take on the challenge of “changing hearts and minds about immigrants.” His eminence ended his day at the largest Catholic university in the U.S. back where he began: at the Student Center where he presided over the morning breakfast, now sharing a pizza dinner with undergraduate juniors and seniors who attended the final event.

A native of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony was born in 1936 in the North Hollywood area of the city. As a child, he attended St. Charles Borromeo Grammar School, and later Los Angeles College, a junior seminary in L.A. He was ordained a priest in 1962. By 1975, he was Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Fresno, in 1980 he became Bishop of Stockton, and in 1985 the first Angelino appointed Archbishop of Los Angeles. In 1991, he was named Cardinal. Mahony encountered controversy in 2003, when the Ventura County senior deputy district attorney, Maeve Fox, opened an investigation on allegations of possible sexual abuse by 17 priests who served under him. After four years of hearings, the matter ended with a record-setting $660 million settlement, awarded to 508 plaintiffs, to be paid by the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Despite the negative attention, Mahony continued to be an advocate for immigration reform, openly criticizing a number of anti-immigration bills, specifically the 2005–06 Sensenbrenner-King Bill (HR 4437).

In May 2006, Cardinal Mahony marched side-by-side with his parishioners through the streets of Los Angeles as part of the Immigrant’s Rights Mobilizations that swept the nation. Now, as Archbishop Emeritus, Mahony has chosen the role of working with Catholic colleges and universities to find ways to foment new generations of leaders who will demystify and tackle issues of immigration. Adopting the spirit of Archbishop Romero and his mission to be “the voice of the voiceless,” the Cardinal wants to continue advocacy for those most marginalized in this country: undocumented Latino immigrants.

Mahony’s trip to DePaul University was one of the first of many trips. He plans to visit Catholic colleges and universities across the country. He remains optimistic that, despite slow moving legislation and confusing policies on how to deal with undocumented immigrants, a shift away from anti-immigrant sentiment is likely, due to the turning tide in population figures. Crediting his Catholic faith for his motivation, he said: “We care about immigrants because they are our own brothers and sisters.”

ENDNOTES

1 According to their web site, “The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is an assembly of the hierarchy of the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands, who jointly exercise certain pastoral functions on behalf of the Christian faithful of the United States.” For more information, see <http://www.usccb.org>.


3 A 2002 California state law that relaxed, for one year, the statute of limitations on sexual abuse cases led to hundreds of allegations against priests who served under Mahony’s tenure as Bishop of Los Angeles. Several aides testified that the Cardinal knowingly

In 2006, the Los Angeles Archdiocese reached a settlement with the victims of abuse, reported by Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times*: <http://nyti.ms/SB3xPt>. One of the accused priests, Oliver O'Grady, became the topic of focus in Amy J. Berg's Academy Award-nominated documentary film, *Deliver Us From Evil* (2006). The film includes segments of Cardinal Mahony's 2004 deposition.