

PASTORAL STATEMENT ON JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS SUNDAY

"With liberty and justice for all." These concluding words of the "Pledge of Allegiance" have been recited by all Americans since our earliest days in school. As children, the words themselves might not have held much meaning then but as we grew and became more acquainted with the history of our nation, our understanding of their significance likewise grew. For me, it is rare that I look at the American flag or listen to our National Anthem without feeling strong emotions and gratitude for all the blessings and freedoms that God has given to our country --- this "one nation, under God" --- and for all the sacrifices made by so many fellow citizens that have preserved and nurtured these blessings and freedoms for these past 237 years of our shared history.

Aside from those of us who have the privilege of being native Americans, the rest of us have ancestors who came to our shores from somewhere else, some willingly, seeking liberty and justice, while others, sadly, arrived in chains.

With genuine reverence and true national pride, we Americans sing about ourselves as "the land of the free and the home of the brave." We take as our national motto, "In God We Trust." We complete oaths with the phrase "so help me God." We honor our independence, recalling our forefathers' inspired words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain, inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Our national awareness of liberty and justice, of freedom and bravery, of equality and rights seems intrinsically joined to our awareness of God as their Source and Guarantor.

Yes, we do by virtue of our Constitution speak of a separation of Church and State when such a distinction is appropriate and legitimate. But we can never ignore or forget the fact that God created all those who constitute the State as well as those within that same group who constitute the Church. God has always been there in the fabric of American life regardless of the opinions of those who argue to the contrary.

President John F. Kennedy got it right in his Inaugural Address when he affirmed "the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the State but from the hand of God." And a century before his words, President Abraham Lincoln spoke to a nation divided by civil war, "With malice toward none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in ..." That work was, is and remains "liberty and justice for all" in this "one nation, under God."

In the Gospel of St. Matthew (25:35-45), the Lord Jesus offered a "judgment of the nations," placing Himself in the persons of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the ill, the imprisoned while saying, "Whatever you did for the least of these, my brethren, you did for me" and, conversely, "Whatever you did not do for them, you did not do for me."

Ten years ago, the Bishops of the United States issued a Pastoral Letter entitled "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope (January 22, 2003)," addressing the plight of immigrants to the United States of America, especially those coming from Mexico. The principles enunciated in that letter were echoed in a recent Pastoral Statement "On Comprehensive Immigration Reform (May 22, 2013)" of the Bishops of New Jersey, strongly advocating the reform of a badly broken system in our country. That something significant and substantial needs to be done is hardly arguable. How best to accomplish that goal, continues to be a source of debate, even division within our nation. Sadly, people are quick to paint the issues involved with political and partisan brushes, thereby adding to the polarization and the delay in resolution.

Comprehensive immigration reform is not Washington's problem. It is a concern for all citizens of our country as well as those who hope to be, much as it was for our ancestors who arrived here with hopes for and dreams of a better life, "under God, with liberty and justice for all." As Pope Francis reminded us during his recent Pastoral Visit to Lampedusa, "We have become used to other people's suffering, it doesn't concern us, it doesn't interest us. It is none of our business." On the contrary whatever we, as Catholics, can do to foster the hopes and dreams of those who see our country as their potential home is an imperative of the Gospel and of the Catholic Social Teaching based upon it, not of our political persuasion. Prayer is a powerful prerogative and something that all of us can do. I believe that with all my heart and soul.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Trenton, I ask all Catholics and those who believe with us, to put aside any partisan differences to pray for all our immigrant sisters and brothers.

Most Reverend David M. O'Connell, C.M. Bishop of Trenton