

Last week Archbishop Sartain released a letter concerning immigrants and refugees. It was in our bulletin. People have also asked me about these issues, so today I want to offer just a few of my own thoughts. I want to start by reminding you about prudential judgement. There are many aspects of the current debates over immigration and refugees that are legitimate public policy issues about which Catholics can have different opinions in good faith. Objectively speaking, some of these ideas might be better than others – but they are a matter of judgement, not doctrine. I'm not going to give you my opinion on those because these policy debates are complicated and I have no special knowledge about them. These are really the laity's area of expertise.

But there are some points of the current debate that touch moral considerations that I do want to address. First, in debating immigration policy it is easy to fall into generalities and abstractions. But throughout we should remember we're dealing with unique individual persons and stories. The Archbishop, quoting Pope Francis, says, "We are called to

live Christian charity and to protect and defend the dignity of every human person.” We are talking about poor, often vulnerable, people at the center of these debates. We must remember their humanity.

There has also been talk about immigrants from certain countries being particularly prone to crime. But I assure you that Original Sin is evenly distributed around the world. No culture or country is any more sinful than another. In the 1800s it was the Irish Catholics who were considered the criminals. The term “Fighting Irish” wasn’t at first a team nickname, but a taunt about their supposed natural tendency towards drunken violence. We shouldn’t let policy be influenced by such emotional mischaracterizations.

Furthermore, when considering human dignity, there is a dignity in families not just individuals. I think of this particularly regarding the undocumented Hispanic families living in America. Frankly, for decades American society has given them contradictory signals. On the one hand, they do not have legal authority to reside here. On the other

hand, we have knowingly paid them to work for us, and everyone knows what's going on. At most the enforcement of the residency laws has been spotty. While some Americans want the laws strictly enforced, others desire the Hispanic presence for their own economic prosperity.

When we debate immigration policies and, I hope, make them more consistent, enforceable, and honest, we should remember the families already here under the current, contradictory immigration regime. We Catholics say we are “pro-family.” But to send one member of a family back because of what is basically random enforcement is destructive of human happiness and the dignity of those families. The Catholic Church is in a particularly good place to witness to the value and dignity of these families, and the pain in splitting them, since many are members of our churches. The Archbishop states that the bishops support “a just and safe immigration system.” We need to deal with this problem. But as future policies are debated and enacted we, as a

society, should give consideration in some way to the roots we have allowed those families to set down here in America.

There have also been policies enacted banning refugees from certain, predominantly Moslem, countries. This all takes place, of course, in the context of Islamist terrorism. When evaluating these issues as Catholics we should remember our own history. If Islam is today considered a dangerous religion, the Catholic Church once carried that same stigma in America. The original “dangerous immigrants” were the Irish of the 1840s and 1850s fleeing the Potato Famine. They were starving and America offered an opportunity for a new life. The problem for predominantly Protestant America was that most of these Irish were Catholics. The Know Nothing movement of that period was directed at stopping this immigration. It was a common belief that the Catholics were subversives, looking to take over the country. They were reputed to be gathering weapons in the basements of their churches – ready to attack at the command of the Pope.

In the 20th century the American opposition to Catholic immigrants were still alive. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act was aimed at ending all immigration from Asia. But it also included severe limits on immigration from eastern and southern Europe. This was to stop more Jews from coming here. But it was also directed at Catholics. Those Italian and Polish Catholics were swamping Protestant America. It had to stop. We Catholics, whose grandparents came to America to escape the wars or injustice in their homelands, should be slow to shut the door on others trying to do the same.

I don't want to overstate the analogy. There was no Catholic terrorism in the 19th century, while there is currently a minority movement within Islam that resorts to terrorism. There have been cases in Europe where refugees have participated in horrible terrorist acts. There is some risk to inviting people from some countries to America. And the Archbishop states that, "We have both a right and a

duty to protect our borders and our citizens.” But we must also evaluate the risk realistically and not panic or exaggerate the danger.

But in addition to the universal principle involved, we Catholics should be very careful. The temptation to single out one religion as dangerous and to treat its followers differently endangers the religious freedom of all of us, but especially of us Catholics. Given American history I promise you that if labeling religions as subversive or dangerous becomes acceptable practice it won't be long before the Catholic Church is so labelled. There are already political forces in our country that see the Catholic Church as a breeding ground for potential hate crimes. With our beliefs about life, sexuality, marriage being out of step with the elite culture we seem to some people as dangerous today as our Catholic ancestors did one hundred or two hundred years ago.

These are complicated issues. As I said, Catholics will legitimately have different view-points on them. But I will end by saying that when forming public policy, whatever those prudential judgements might be,

we should not forget charity, or act out of fear. Some of our most shameful actions as Americans have come from fearing the dangers of the world more than we trusted in God to see us through. While some of our greatest moments as a nation have come when we risked our own lives and safety for the protection and well-being of strangers.