

**Homily of Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami**  
**Mass for Immigrants and their Families**  
**St. Peter's Catholic Church**  
**Washington, DC**  
**May 29, 2014**

To those who accused Jesus of breaking the laws of his day, he replied: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mk 2: 27) This teaching underscores the point that positive law, even Divine positive law, is meant to benefit not to enslave mankind. The patriots, who broke the law by tossing tea into Boston Harbor, understood this – as did Rosa Parks, who broke the law by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. When laws fail to advance the common good, they can and should be changed.

Our Immigration laws need to be changed: they are antiquated and inadequate for the promotion and regulation of social and economic relations of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. On this point everyone is seemingly agreed. However, the solutions proposed should not make the situation worse. Outdated laws, ill adapted to the increasing interdependence of our world and the globalization of labor, are bad laws. However, proposed changes must take into account both human dignity and the national interest: otherwise, bad laws will be replaced by worse ones.

For this reason, the U.S. Bishops have supported broad comprehensive immigration reform that, while addressing future needs for labor by providing for a legal “future flow” worker program, also offers an “earned” path to citizenship for those 11 million or so migrant workers and their families already in the country as well as fixing the unacceptable backlogs for family reunification visas that keep families separated for intolerable lengths of time.

We are at a crucial moment in the national debate, one which our nation must seize, not lose. We have tried enforcement-only policies for nearly 30 years—spending hundreds of billions of dollars-- and yet illegal immigration has increased because the labor market has demanded willing and able workers.

Illegal immigration is unacceptable for our nation, our economy, and the migrants themselves, who have no protection in the law. Bringing immigrants out of the shadows will provide us a more stable work force, increase our security, and ensure that migrants are not exploited or die in the desert.

Yet, we resist this policy solution and instead accept the labor and taxes of our undocumented population without offering them the protection of the law. We also scapegoat them for our problems, and separate them from their families. As a nation dedicated to the rights of all, we cannot have it both ways. Our immigration system is a stain on the soul of our nation. As a moral matter, it must be changed. We must pray that our elected officials recognize this and have the courage to reform it.

Victor Hugo’s 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Les Miserables*, tells how pride and neglect of mercy represented in the bitterly zealous legalism of Inspector Javert ultimately destroys him. Today, modern day Javerts, on radio and T.V. talk shows, fan flames of resentment against supposed law breakers equating them with terrorists intent on hurting us. However, these people only ask for the opportunity to become legal and have a chance for citizenship – to come out of the shadows where they live in fear of a knock on their door in the dead of night or an immigration raid to their work place. Like Jean Valjean, today’s migrants only look for the opportunity to redeem themselves through honest work. This is the point of the our advocacy – and has been for over a decade.

Today, some take umbrage at the Catholic Bishops’ advocacy on behalf of the undocumented– but, in doing so, we stand in a proud moral tradition, like the novel’s benevolent Bishop Myriel, who gave his

candlesticks to the desperate Jean Valjean and protected him from arrest by Javert. For this reason, we call upon the House of Representatives to seize the opportunity for a comprehensive fix to our broken immigration system.

A nation that honors law breakers like the patriots of the “Boston Tea Party”, a nation that can allow the dignified defiance of Rosa Parks in her act of law breaking to touch its conscience, is a nation that also can make room for modern-day Jean Valjeans. We can be a nation of laws, without becoming a nation of Javerts. As Jesus reminded the embittered zealots of his day, laws are designed for the benefit – not the harm – of humankind.