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National Migration Week and the goal of immigration reform, 2014

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput

EDITOR'S NOTE: National Migration Week will be observed in dioceses around the country January 5-11. Ongoing goals of Catholic efforts for immigration justice include:

- 1. Provide a path to citizenship for undocumented persons in the country.*
- 2. Preserve family unity as a cornerstone of our national immigration system.*
- 3. Provide legal paths for low-skilled immigrant workers to come and work in the United States.*
- 4. Restore due process protections to immigration enforcement policies.*
- 5. Address the root causes of migration caused by persecution and economic disparity.*

The observance of National Migration Week was launched over a quarter century ago by the U.S. bishops to give Catholics an opportunity to see the wide diversity of peoples in the Church and the ministries serving them.

While the immigration debate in this country has burned on for years, Congress has consistently failed to pass adequate reform legislation. No single party bears the blame for the paralysis. Both Democrats and Republicans have misused this issue, and the powerful emotions it generates, for political gain. As a result, despite millions of words in partisan sloganeering, our national immigration policy still fails to address the complicated economic and social forces driving immigration.

Worse, this gridlock has very human consequences in the separation of children who are U.S. citizens from their non-citizen parents, and the wholesale alienation of immigrant communities.

As America's bishops have stressed many times in the past, in the United States we now employ a permanent underclass of human beings who build our roads, pick our fruit, clean our hotel rooms and landscape our lawns. Most of these men and women, like millions of immigrants before them, simply want a better life for their children. They pay billions into our tax and Social Security systems. But even as we benefit from their labor, we too often do not offer them the basic protection of law. When convenient, we blame them for our social ills and pursue policies that intimidate them and their families.

Our immigration laws undergird this troubling status quo. Despite billions spent on enforcement each year, most unauthorized migrants find jobs once they arrive, or, in the case of visa overstays, remain in the United States. And while hundreds of thousands of these workers are added to our economy each year, only a fraction of that number in annual immigrant visas become available for people to enter our country legally.

Congress can end these current policy and humanitarian failures by adopting a comprehensive immigration reform package. Any serious reform should provide a path

to permanent residency for the undocumented already here, and create avenues for future workers and their families to enter the country legally.

Obviously, maintaining the rule of law is a vital aspect of reform. Americans have very legitimate concerns for public safety and the solvency of our public institutions. Nor is the problem purely a product of ill will in Washington, D.C.

Some people enjoy blaming the United States for nearly every problem, and unfortunately, American policy has had a very mixed history in Latin America. But until Latin American nations seriously reform their own legal and economic systems, they also bear responsibility for the current crisis. Just pointing fingers at the United States accomplishes very little. One of the implications of a hemispheric economy is that both sides of the border need to cooperate. Both sides of the border have duties.

Nonetheless, we should remember that while we are a nation of laws, we also are a nation founded on the principle of justice. Accomplishing immigration reform would restore justice to our immigration system and strengthen, not undermine, the rule of law.

By providing the undocumented population an opportunity to work toward permanent residency through earned legalization, we would encourage them to identify themselves to the government. By creating avenues for migrant workers and their families to cross the border safely, we would better enable the government to monitor who enters the country and for what purpose. Law enforcement officials would then be able to focus on apprehending real criminals: drug smugglers, human traffickers and potential terrorists.

It does not take political courage to complain about undocumented immigrants.

It *doestake* political courage to seek and achieve real change in immigration policies sustained on the weakness of those without rights or a voice.

We need to pray that our elected federal officials will find the courage in this new year of Our Lord, 2014, to finally pass real immigration reform. In the end, the ultimate question for Congress – and for all Americans – is whether we want to live in a society that accepts the toil of migrants with one hand, and then treats them like outcasts with the other. For our own sake, I want to believe the answer is “no.”