

Near Neighbors and Far Neighbors
by Fr. John S. Rausch

Because last year Congress failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform, 2008 began with a patch quilt of state laws and local ordinances that reflect a national confusion about dealing with immigration. On the one hand, Lake Havasu, Arizona, like a number of other cities, struck an agreement with federal agents to train local police to interrogate and detain all undocumented immigrants for deportation. Conversely, Detroit with its anti-profiling ordinance prohibited police from questioning people about their immigration status. These contrasting examples, together with the nearly 250 immigration laws passed in forty-six states last year, highlight the nation's perplexity over a unified policy for undocumented immigrants.

Approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States, and many live in stable families that include legal residents as well as native-born and naturalized citizens plus their children who were born citizens. Polls confirm by a margin of 58 to 35 that Americans support "a program giving illegal immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements."

Ironically, most research indicates that tougher border enforcement by more Border Patrol agents, more walls and more electronic sensors has actually boosted the undocumented population. Because crossing the Mexican border has become increasingly dangerous, many workers who frequently shuttled back and forth now stay in the United States and eventually send for their families.

The "why" of immigration is explained by push-pull arguments. Poverty pushes people to emigrate. Economic globalization pulls them, because globalization exacerbates the inequalities between nations, encouraging the skilled and desperate from a poorer country to cross borders to a wealthier one. Additionally, the labor demands of a wealthy country like the United States pull the semi-skilled and unskilled workers from less developed countries. A push comes from free trade agreements favoring transnational corporations that create a harsh climate for local businesses forcing workers to emigrate for employment.

Case in point: the United States encouraged the North American Free Trade Act with Canada and Mexico. Since ratification of NAFTA in 1994, Mexico's economy grew disappointingly with increases of decent jobs matching only a third of the millions needed. Average factory wages in Mexico have fallen by more than 5 percent under NAFTA, and unskilled workers are paid only \$5 a day. Already U.S. and Canadian agribusiness corporations with their subsidized crops have underpriced local markets forcing 2 million Mexican peasant farmers off their land. Today 19 million more Mexicans live in poverty than when NAFTA was passed.

In a real sense, the economic policies of the United States draw immigrant workers to the employment opportunities here, but the woefully small number of visas available for workers entices them to come illegally.

Demographers predict eventually questions about undocumented workers will fade as the Mexican birthrate declines and Mexico's surplus labor force shrinks. In the next decade millions of skilled baby boomers in the U.S. will retire creating a shortage of workers that will probably beg more immigrant workers.

Meanwhile, people of faith have a unique opportunity to reach out to immigrants who worship with them weekly. They can reject the simplistic argument about who's legal and who's not, because they can develop a relationship through compassion and hear the story of the people in the pew beside them. The faith community can help integrate newcomers dreaming of a dignified life for their families. To people of faith, the categories of alien, illegal or undocumented pale in comparison to "neighbor"—and some neighbors are closer than others.