

Two Sundays ago a rumor spread primarily through social media that officials from Immigration and Customs Enforcement were targeting churches in order to arrest undocumented immigrants. Of American Catholics age 35 and younger, 54% are hispanic, and they have older relatives. Two Sundays ago throughout the country church attendance dropped as people feared for themselves or members of their families. Here in Kansas City none of our churches witnessed a raid; ICE officials insisted that they had planned nothing unusual that day. Still, the incident revealed how much fear lies in the immigrant community at a time in American history when many of them feel unwelcome, and some fall victim to hate crimes as Olathe apparently had this week.

An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live within the boundaries of the United States. The numbers have raised fears among Americans that our borders are not secure and that evil people from other countries have easy access to commit crimes and terrorism here.

Most immigrants come for other reasons. They go to school. They hold specialized jobs. Or they are fleeing life-threatening challenges at home, such as gang warfare, economic despair, and social oppression. Some suffer abuse at the hands of a family member. Many immigrants entered the United States legally, but found the process toward citizenship complex and expensive. It can cost thousands of dollars and take 20 years to pass through all the stages. Exceptions can be made for those seeking asylum, or those so athletically gifted that our sports teams need them now. Many ordinary immigrants overstayed their visa, found employment, are raising a family, and go to church. Because of their large network of families and friends, many of them have become complacent. Instead of pursuing the difficult process of legal documentation, they take their chances.

Some Americans criticize undocumented immigrants for breaking the law. But the immigrant is probably not focusing on that; the immigrant is trying to support a family, including children who were born in the United States, or who were brought here at a very young age, and now are active in schools and youth groups. Many citizens like the slogan "America first." Many immigrants are thinking "Family first. God first."

The Catholic bishops in the United States have been pleading for immigration reform and an openness to refugees. Reform should include alleviating the oppressive conditions in other countries that cause people to migrate, and it should seek other ways to regularize those without documents without sending them back to their countries of origin, dividing families, and breaking the social fabric that is essential to a healthy American society.

Today's first reading is a short passage from Isaiah that offers great tenderness to a people in exile because of violence in their homeland. Zion was thinking, "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." But then God speaks: "Can a mother forget her infant? Even should she forget, I will never forget you." This is the message that Mother Church offers not just to immigrants, but to all those who are in exile from their homeland, their family, or people they can trust: "I will never forget you. Your church is also your home."