

No one knows exactly how many undocumented persons from other countries are living in the United States, but 12 million is a reasonable guess and it could be more. For years the Catholic bishops of our country have been requesting a reform of immigration laws. Our economy demands foreign labor, but there are not enough visas. Some citizens and legal residents live far from their immediate family because the process for obtaining the available visas can take 20 years or more. Something needs to be done.

Our Church does not condone unlawful entry into the country, nor any other attempt to avoid immigration laws. Our bishops do not propose an amnesty that rewards people who disobey the law and creates injustice for those who do. However, to resolve the situation it would be unrealistic to send millions of people back across the borders and oceans. Our bishops have proposed an earned legalization, especially for those who are contributing to our country. Let the undocumented come forward, pay a fine and an application fee, go through a rigorous criminal background check and security screenings, prove that they have paid taxes, show that they are learning English, and let them obtain a visa that could lead to permanent residency over time. Without such a process, laws are being broken, people are living in fear, families are separated, and human rights are being ignored.

Last month the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration set aside the first weekend in May for Catholics to pray for immigration reform. They set this weekend aside because Congress was facing a deadline to introduce a reform bill. A group of Senators did this on Friday, and the bishops' committee on migration called it an important first step; it still needs measures to improve Mexican and Central American economies to reduce the pressure on people to migrate from their homes in the first place. Coincidentally, Arizona legislators just amended a controversial immigration law in response to allegations that it legalized racial profiling. Racism is the underside of immigration issues. Some people hide their racial prejudice behind an issue like protecting our borders. Of course we need to protect our borders, but that does not mean irrationally excluding people who look different.

When Saint Paul traveled from country to country on his missionary journeys, he did so in the days before there were passports. According to today's first reading, he entered new cities, preached about Jesus, chose some local leaders, and put them in charge before he left. When you think of him as a foreigner performing these actions, you realize how threatening they may have seemed. This surely influenced some of the local authorities to inflict the many hardships Paul says happened to him whenever he journeyed far from home.

Not everyone will agree on how we should reform our national immigration policy, but nearly everyone agrees something should be done. This weekend the Catholic bishops of the United States are asking us to do something very simple: pray for it. Put it all in God's hands. Let God know that we want Christian values to prevail in all the ways we confront those from other countries who seek a place to live and work among us.