

ORAL STATEMENT OF BISHOP KICANAS

Madam Chairman, I am Bishop Gerald Kicanas, Bishop of Tucson, AZ, and vice-president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). I testify today on behalf of the U.S. Catholic bishops. I would like to thank you, Madam Chairman, as well as Ranking Member Steve King for holding this hearing today on so critical an issue and inviting me to testify.

Madam Chairman, in my written testimony I outline at length what I and the U.S. Catholic bishops are convinced is the just and effective public policy needed for repairing our broken immigration system. I would like to emphasize this morning what I and my fellow bishops think are some of the ethical and moral issues in this debate confronting our elected officials and the nation.

Madam Chairman, the immigration issue is often dissected in terms of its economic, social, or legal impacts on our nation. What is not often acknowledged, and frankly is often dismissed, is that immigration is ultimately a humanitarian issue, since it impacts the basic rights and dignity of millions of persons and their families. As such, it has moral implications, especially how it impacts the basic survival and decency of life experienced by human beings like us.

Madam Chairman, our current immigration system fails to meet the moral test of protecting the basic human rights and dignity of the person. As the bishop who oversees the diocese along the whole of the Arizona-Mexico border—the epicenter of migrant movement---I witness the human consequences of our broken immigration system in my diocese’s social service programs,

hospitals, schools, and parishes. Regularly, anxious and troubled immigrants come to ask our priests or employees for assistance for a loved one—a parent who has been detained, a child who has lost a parent, or, tragically, a family member who has lost a loved one in the harsh Arizona desert. We strive to help as best we can, realizing that unless we change the laws which apply to immigration, we are only providing a band aid to the situation. Because of a broken system, immigrant families are being separated; migrant workers are subject to exploitation by unscrupulous employers; and those attempting to find work by coming north are being abused and taken advantage of by human smugglers.

It is shocking to realize that about 5,000 men, women, and children have died in the desert since 1998. One such victim was Josseline Hernandez, age 14, from El Salvador. Her and her 9 year old brother were attempting to reunite with their mother in California when they became lost in the desert. Josseline became dehydrated and survived for 4 days until she died. She was found on the 12th day. Josseline's story is being repeated far too often along our Arizona border.

Madam Chairman, the overwhelming majority of migrants coming to the United States come not for nefarious purposes, but to either find work to support their families or to join their loved ones. Once here, they do contribute their work and skills to our country. Yet on their way north and while in our country, they and their families often are subject to the dangers and abuses I have mentioned. This is a situation which, from a humanitarian and ethical standpoint, needs to be addressed in a humane and comprehensive manner.

From a moral perspective, as a nation we cannot accept the toil and taxes of immigrants without providing them the protection of law. This creates a society which is dependent upon workers yet who do not possess the same rights as others, both in the workplace and communities, and perpetuates a permanent underclass in our nation. Such a society fails to honor our nation's values of fairness, opportunity, and compassion, values of which we are rightly proud as Americans.

Madam Chairman, let me address the issue of the rule of law, which is a flashpoint in the debate and to which many immigration reform opponents point in arguing against legal status for the undocumented. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wholeheartedly agrees that the rule of law is paramount, and that those who break the law should be held accountable. As our testimony points out, comprehensive immigration reform would honor the rule of law and help restore it by requiring 11 million undocumented to pay a fine, pay back taxes, learn English, and get in the back of the line. We believe this a proportionate penalty for the offense.

We also believe immigration reform would make us more secure, as it would require 11 million persons to register with the government and would create legal avenues for persons to enter in the future in a safe and orderly manner. These measures would permit law enforcement to know who is in the country and who is coming, thus freeing up time and resources to concentrate on those coming who intend to do us harm—smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal elements.

Madam Chairman, let me also address the issue of border security, the topic of much discussion recently, especially in our State of Arizona. Church teaching acknowledges and upholds the

right of a nation to control its borders. It is our view that the best way to secure our southern border is through immigration reform. Enforcement-only policies, pursued for twenty-five years now, have not solved the problem.

Since the year 2000, we have spent \$100 billion on immigration border and interior enforcement, including fencing and barriers, but it has not halted the migration flow, as the number of undocumented during that time has increased. Instead, the concentration of enforcement resources around cities and towns has directed migrants seeking to cross into more remote areas. As a result, smuggling networks have thrived, charging exorbitant fees to transport migrants and endangering their lives.

Despite the efforts of the Border Patrol, whose work in the Tucson and Yuma Sectors I deeply respect and who provide life saving rescue to migrants, the border continues to be a dangerous area. We need to provide avenues for workers and their families to enter legally, so that the Border Patrol and other law enforcement can focus on criminal elements attempting to cross or smuggle illicit goods.

Before I close, Madam Chairman, I would like to address the issue of SB 1070, the immigration law recently passed in my State. It is my belief that the passage of this law reflects the frustration of Arizonans and the American public with Congress for not addressing the issue of immigration reform. The message is to break the partisan paralysis and act now. Without Congressional action on immigration reform---sooner rather than later---other states will pass similar laws, to the detriment of our nation.

Madam Chairman, as pastor of a diverse and large faith community, I see in my ministry hardening attitudes, deepening divisions, and growing rancor around this issue. I recently had to express the urgency of the situation—and the need for a federal solution---to the President. Polls to date have shown that the majority of Americans believe that comprehensive immigration reform is the answer.

We must have a new system which applies a humane but fair standard of law to our immigration system, which replaces illegality with legality, and which prepares our nation for the challenges of the 21st century, and this must be achieved as soon as possible. To delay further will only make the situation worse and further divide Americans.

Thank you.