

The Catholic Church is a community of believers and as such respects the rule of law. It does not turn a blind eye to illegal behavior and would certainly not reward it.

However, a law does not have unquestionable authority just because it is enacted. Laws are subject to higher principles, such as respect for the dignity of the human person. When a law does not flow from this fundamental respect, when it is inhumane, or does not serve the common good, people have a moral responsibility to change it, not to worsen its effect.

An example of such a bad law is the protection of the choice to kill a child in the womb. In response to the current laws on abortion right-thinking people do not ask legalistically: “what part of legal don’t you understand?” Rather, moved by respect for the dignity of the human person, they work to abolish the law, or at least to lessen its horrible effects.

Many conscientious people are asking if the present body of law that addresses the flow of immigrants into our country is not another example of bad law that needs reform.

The problems with bad immigration law are of a different moral category and of lesser gravity compared to abortion. Nevertheless, immigration laws are rightly judged bad and in need of reform when they do not serve the common good, are inhumane, or do not respect human dignity.

That is the position of the Catholic Church, taught by its leaders for centuries as a result of applying God’s Word to everyday life. Immigration is a political issue and a moral one as well, because of its association with the dignity of the human person, not to mention because of how God takes personally how we treat others (cf. *Mt 25: 31-46*).

Catholic social teaching acknowledges that a nation has a right to secure its borders and to govern the flow of immigrants. However, these rights must be balanced with other corresponding rights, such as a person’s right to migrate in search of what is needed to live in human dignity – productive work and fair wages, food and shelter, education and health care, and protection from harm – when these cannot be found in their own homeland.

A law can also be judged bad and in need of reform when it enforces justice not tempered by compassion. Feeling another person’s pain – compassion – should result in laws that are at least less harsh and uncaring. Laws on waging war and even animal protection are influenced by compassion, so why not those concerning immigration?

Consider the suffering of the immigrant who leaves homeland, family, friends, and all that is familiar, taking great risks of grave danger to get here in hopes of escaping extreme poverty. True, some come here without permission and so are without legal documents, but that does not make that person a criminal. Those who come here are for the most part law-abiding, hard-working, tax-paying, revenue-generating, church-going, and family-oriented folk.

In their regard, right-thinking people do not ask legalistically: “what part of illegal don’t you understand?” Instead, out of compassion, they work to reform immigration law, not to worsen its effect, such as creating a system that separates husbands and wives, parents and children, sometimes for years!

No one is proposing turning a blind eye to illegal behavior or rewarding it. Yes, secure the borders, require compliance with a fair process for entering the country, expect proficiency in civics and the English language, maybe even impose a fine commensurate to the offense. But secure as well laws that respect the dignity of the human person and that are tempered with compassion. This is the way to protect against threats to national security and the economy, and from becoming a cruel and inhumane society.