



COLUMBAN CENTER FOR ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH

February 4, 2015

Dear Speaker Boehner, Majority Leader McConnell and all Representatives and Senators,

As the national advocacy office representing the Missionary Society of St. Columban in the U.S. region, we stand in solidarity with marginalized people whom Columban missionaries serve in 15 countries throughout the world. Since our founding as a Catholic missionary society nearly 100 years ago, we have welcomed the stranger in our communities. We value the dignity of all life. Columban priests on the U.S.-Mexico border and in Catholic parishes in the Los Angeles region offer hospitality to undocumented immigrants, in accordance with Scripture, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35)

We support common sense immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship. We support President Obama’s use of his constitutional authority to end the suffering of undocumented immigrants in the United States. We see upcoming legislation and amendments to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appropriations as harmful to immigrant families, and we urge you to reject legislation that will adversely affect immigrant communities in your states and districts. We urge all members of the House and Senate to reject legislation, including amendments to the DHS appropriations bill, that would stop, interfere or weaken the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for the Parents of Americans (DAPA) programs and other provisions made possible through recent executive orders on immigration.¹

The Administration’s recent actions to provide temporary relief to millions of undocumented immigrants will allow families in our parishes to stay together. We serve families with children who have DACA, and we are active members of an El Paso-based task force working to educate thousands of people in the local community about DACA/DAPA expansion. We believe family is at the heart of the Gospel, and at the heart of the communities we serve. Every day, we hear stories of people whose families have been torn apart by deportation. We hope that by successfully implementing DACA and DAPA, families will no longer live in fear, and our communities will prosper.

In addition to the separation of families through deportation, Columbans on the U.S.-Mexico border have witnessed the great suffering of migrants due to inhumane border security policies. We are very concerned about H.R. 399, the Secure Our Borders First act of 2015, which will increase militarized policies that have been proven ineffective, and even harmful to the local population in towns on the border. At the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas, we welcome migrants who come to the United States to escape suffering in their home countries. Already, we have seen how the individuals in our community are racially profiled by police, Border Patrol, and even the National Guard. Under H.R. 399, we fear that these instances will increase, and violate constitutional rights under the Fourth Amendment. We also know that many migrants have legitimate claims to asylum, which are ignored under the bill’s “operational control” goals.

¹ www.whitehouse.gov/immigrationaction



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Columban priests on the U.S.-Mexico border are especially concerned that H.R. 399 does not address the need for accountability measures, including investigation of the use of force and systemic abuse of migrants. We must hold our law enforcement officials accountable for the instances where migrants have been abused, and provide an effective complaint process for victims of abuse. In Anapra, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico where Columbans serve at a Catholic parish, we witness the violence and corruption that often cause families to seek safety and refuge in the United States. Rather than focusing on policies that strengthen border security, we must seek to identify the root causes of migration, and put resources toward stemming the flow of those crossing the border in a productive, compassionate manner.

We oppose H.R. 2278, the Strengthen and Fortify Enforcement (SAFE) Act, and any similar legislation to expand interior immigration enforcement efforts. We join others in the faith community who oppose legislation that criminalizes our priests who serve migrants in acts of compassion. We also strongly oppose expanding immigration detention, the encouragement of state and local law enforcement officials to collaborate with immigration enforcement efforts, and decreasing protections and immigration relief for certain migrant groups.² We join the faith community in unanimously opposing legislation that would roll back the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which includes vital protections for children and individuals including the "Protection of Children Act" (H.R. 5143) and The Asylum Reform and Border Protection Act (H.R. 5137).

We urge all members of Congress to reject proposals that seek to separate families, further militarize the border, remove critical protections for those seeking refuge, and criminalize our immigrant brothers and sisters in all discussions regarding the DHS appropriations bill and future legislation. In December, 2014, in a Society-wide statement covering 15 countries where Columbans serve, the Missionary Society of St. Columban re-affirmed our commitment to the dignity of all people, especially those who seek to migrate: "We believe that we are called to both serve the needs of migrants everywhere, and to address the root causes of migration so that people and their families have the choice to remain at home." We pray that Congress seeks productive policies that are compassionate. We implore you to support immigration measures that serve all members of our community, and respond to God's call to care for the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40).

Sincerely,

Scott Wright

Director, Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach

² <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/say-no-to-the-safe-act/>