

Testimony of Bishop Andrew Cozzens in support of H.F. 97

House Transportation Policy and Finance Committee

March 25, 2015

Chairman Kelly and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Bishop Andrew Cozzens and I am an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul Minneapolis and also serve as the Archdiocese's chief minister to the Latino community. I am here today speaking on behalf of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, which is the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Minnesota. The Minnesota Catholic Conference supports House File 97.

Today you will hear testimony and personal stories about why providing provisional driver's licenses for undocumented persons is good public policy because, among other things, it helps immigrants meet basic needs such as getting to work and running errands for their families, particularly in the many parts of Minnesota that lack public transportation.

The legislation also will create safer roads by helping to ensure drivers meet basic standards; it will help foster workforce stability; and it will aid law enforcement by making it less likely that an eyewitness to crime will refuse to come forward because he or she is undocumented.

As a Catholic bishop I wish to focus today on the moral imperative of assisting the immigrants in our midst and ensuring that we do not create a sub-class of citizens living in the shadows of our society.

One of the most common exhortations of the Hebrew and Christian Bible is the command to welcome the stranger with hospitality. For example, Leviticus 19:34 states, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." The truth is that none of us chose where we were born and we have an obligation to share the blessings we have received in our country with others within reasonable limits.

Though some look upon undocumented persons as lawbreakers, we are called to treat them with charity and justice. This is because the causes of immigration to this country are complex and usually involve fleeing poverty, crime, and political instability for an opportunity for safety and economic opportunity. Indeed, most religious traditions and international law recognize the right to migrate to meet basic human needs.

This does not mean that undocumented immigrants are necessarily entitled to all the rights and benefits of U.S. citizens. States and nations can regulate immigration for the common good and respect for the law is an important value. But law was made for the good of persons and communities, not the other way around.

Unfortunately, our federal government has failed in its task of enacting comprehensive immigration reform to meet the challenge of addressing what to do with the more than 11 million undocumented persons who are living in the United States, more than 90,000 in Minnesota.

In the meantime, we, as Minnesotans, must ask ourselves how we must best address the basic human needs of those living on the margins of our society. Everyone knows it is not a reasonable solution to send home all the undocumented people in our society, and that many of them contribute to our economy and culture in very positive way.

Provisional driver's license legislation does not reward lawlessness. Rather, it benefits not only immigrants, but all of us, for the reasons previously mentioned and about which you will hear more today.

Sadly, not offering immigrants an opportunity for a license will actually only contribute to the likelihood that undocumented immigrants, isolated from the broader society and forced to operate in a parallel economy, jeopardizing their future and the hopes of their families who, though they may come from another place, are persons who share the same aspirations as other Americans.

I believe that this legislation is an important human rights test. Will we, as Minnesotans, embrace our brothers and sisters and help them in a way that costs us nothing as a community? Or, do we fall back on a narrow conception of what it means to be an American, based on language, culture, and economic status? I hope today that we follow the biblical exhortation and remember that our families, were once strangers in this land who arrived with the same hope, needing mercy from a helping hand to make a fresh start.

Thank you very much.