

Interview with Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, California

By John L. Allen Jr., NCR senior correspondent
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Almost 900 Catholic policy activists and service providers who work with immigrants and refugees, along with an impressive phalanx of bishops, met in Washington, D.C., July 28-31 for a conference titled “Renewing Hope, Seeking Justice.” Among other things, the gathering was designed to launch a major Catholic push in favor of comprehensive immigration reform heading into the 2008 elections.

I wrote a piece for the NCR Web site on the conference, which can be found here: Catholics call for ‘fair and humane’ immigration policies. (<http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/1486>)

I interviewed Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, who delivered a keynote address at the conference, for the most recent issue of NCR. I also had the chance to speak with a couple of other bishops who took part: Bishop Jaime Soto, the coadjutor bishop of Sacramento, and Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City.

The full texts of those interviews can be found here:

- *Interview: Bishop Jaime Soto*
(http://ncronline.org/mainpage/specialdocuments/soto_interview.pdf)
- *Interview: Bishop John Wester*
(http://ncronline.org/mainpage/specialdocuments/wester_interview.pdf)

NCR: What’s the aim of this conference?

Soto: For many of the people who are gathering from around the country, there’s a certain sense of frustration and disappointment about not only the failure of immigration reform last summer, but also the continuing harsh measures that are being implemented by Homeland Security. Those measures are really causing havoc within the immigrant community, and are also producing a great deal of frustration for providers of immigration services. The hope is to bring these folks together, not only to give them up-to-date information about what’s happening, but also to keep them energized about the possibility of an immigration reform bill.

It’s never been easy to get immigration reform through the Congress. Sometimes it’s a process that takes years of building consensus. It’s important for us to stay engaged with the debate, to continue to push for what is reasonable, workable, and most effective, not only for the immigrants themselves but for American society as a whole.

Cardinal Mahony says he’s optimistic that comprehensive immigration reform can be achieved within two years. Do you share that?

I think there’s a possibility that we could get a reform bill by 2010. From a political standpoint, it will be easier for any new administration to get that matter out of the way early in a first term rather than later. In fact, had it not been for 9/11, we might have had a bill during the first Bush term. However, that was then, this is now. It’s a more difficult challenge in a post-9/11 world, but it has to be done. I would say that comprehensive reform by 2010 is ‘optimistically possible.’

Will the public see immigration as a top priority of the U.S. bishops in 2008?

In some ways, it already has been a priority. When the primaries were in full swing, at a time when a lot of very unfortunate remarks were being made about immigrants and immigration policy, Cardinal Mahony wrote a letter to the candidates taking them to task for their petty pandering to the worst instincts and the worst fears in American voters.

The bishops will be engaging the political process, not in terms of a partisan agenda, but with the principles of the church's social teaching. One of those principles is, of course, respect for immigrants.

Politically, it seems likely that abortion will be an important concern again. The Obama campaign has said that it will make abortion a campaign issue. As in the past, the bishops will continue to make the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception a key issue. Along with that, however, we don't want the Catholic community to be a single-issue community. Our moral tradition looks at the dignity of the human person not just in terms of particular issues, but the full range from conception to natural death. We need to be 100 percent pro-life, and immigration is a pro-life issue.

In 2004, the bishops may have been united on abortion, but they were divided on the question of Communion for pro-choice politicians. Do you see a similar division on immigration, or are you basically on the same page?

I have found a very strong consensus among the bishops with regard to immigration. It's a national issue, whether one is a bishop in California or Florida, or in Kansas or Iowa. No matter where you are, it's a relevant issue. My sense is that there's a very strong consensus that we do want to see an effective immigration reform bill in the coming years.

There may be unity among the bishops, but immigration can be a terribly divisive issue at the grassroots.

I would agree with that. In a sense, many Catholics have been persuaded by the more visceral arguments against immigrants offered in the media and by some politicians. For that reason, whether it's on this or other social issues, we as bishops have a strong teaching role to fulfill within our own communities. It's important for us to focus on educating our own Catholic community.

How?

There's a popular saying, and a prudent one, that you should practice what you preach. I agree with that, but I also think there's a certain virtue in preaching what we practice. The Catholic community in this country has been very successful in integrating and assimilating large immigrant and refugee communities. We are a counter-point to so much of the fear and anxiety the broader society often feels. We can point to our own experience of vitality as a result of having integrated immigrants and refugees. If we can reflect on what we're already doing in practice, I think that can be a persuasive argument for much of our Catholic community.

We haven't stopped serving immigrants and refugees in our social service agencies or in our hospitals, and by and large people understand the reasons why we do that. The virtue of our practice can help to deflect some of the more poisoned polemic that's out there, to put it into perspective.

Some Catholics might say that they're all for helping the weak and the poor, but illegal immigrants broke the law, and, in effect, you're condoning that misconduct. How you respond?

We have an immigration system that is broken. Basically, it punishes some of the most aspiring, courageous, and hard-working members of our community. It has criminalized self-sacrifice and hard work. The immigrants themselves pay the largest price because of their undocumented status. We need to come up with a system that rewards hard work and self-sacrifice.

So in a sound-bite, it's not that they broke the law, but rather that the law is broken.

Yes, that's it. The law is broken.

This isn't just a social justice concern for the Catholic church in America, but also a pastoral one, because many of today's immigrants are Catholic.

There's no doubt about it. In the same way that we once walked with the Irish and the Italians and the Germans and the Poles, today we are walking with the Hispanic community and the Filipino community. That's part of what it means for us to fulfill St. Paul's vision in Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, that we are one body of Christ. You can never say to one of the members of the body that there's no place for them.

But another way of looking at the pastoral concern is that the bishops are simply pandering to the immigrants because most of them are Catholic.

Our conference this week is, in itself, evidence of our commitment to work with immigrants and refugees because we're Catholic, not because they're Catholic. The majority of the Vietnamese refugees who benefitted from our programs, for example, are non-Catholic. The refugee programs that we operate around the world demonstrate that we have served many of the Muslim and Islamic communities who have needed refugee relief. Our own history speaks to the truth of our commitment to serve immigrants and refugees, regardless of their religious background.

Still, some critics say that if this were Europe, and most of the immigrants were North African Muslims, you would be singing a different tune.

I think there's a difference between the United States and Europe, but that's not it. America in general, and the Catholic church in America, by and large has been more successful than Europe at integrating and assimilating large immigrant communities. Some of the reaction we see in Europe today, I suspect, is the result of their own failure to come up with programs that adequately inculcate immigrant communities into European societies. Many of those communities have stayed very marginalized in Europe.

One piece of evidence is that the strong backlash we've seen within Islamic communities in Europe really hasn't happened here in America. In part, maybe in large part, this is because the Muslim community here has assimilated a lot of American values, especially our civil rights tradition. In other words, the difference may not be so much a matter of laws as of culture. The United States had had a civil culture that has learned how to accommodate immigrants across the generations. It's foundational; you might say that it's in the DNA of American society.

If that's the case, why are we seeing such a strong anti-immigrant temper these days?

Like many paradoxical aspects of American life, there have always been currents of anti-immigrant feeling throughout U.S. history, particularly over the last 100 years. It ebbs and flows, and we're now at one of those high water marks. I think it's also driven by the economic times we're dealing with now. As a church, we have to appeal to the best aspects of America's history.