

Interview with Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City, Utah

By John L. Allen Jr., NCR senior correspondent

July 31, 2008

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: You spoke with staffers and legislators from both the House and the Senate. What did you hear?

Wester: What I’m hearing is that they understand the need for comprehensive immigration reform, and they themselves want it. They realize that we have to have comprehensive reform in this country. They talk a lot about enforcement, and I think it’s difficult for many of them to consider any measure that doesn’t have some enforcement package. Of course, the Catholic church fully recognizes that the United States has not only the right, but also the obligation, to protect its borders and its citizens. From our perspective, however, the best way to accomplish that is through comprehensive reform. Building fences and putting people in jail, or deporting them, is not the way to do it.

People have a right to try to find a better life. If our country has the ability to assume immigrants, and the United States certainly does, then we have a moral obligation to open our arms, as has always been the case in the past. Regrettably and sadly, our country has become very closed to newcomers. We seem to want to kick them out. The church is trying to encourage a more humane, more generous response.

Do you find lawmakers open to that message?

I was encouraged. I think they are open to the basic principles. How we hammer that out, however, is going to be very difficult. The mistake last summer, I think, is that a handful [of lawmakers] got together and tried to push a package through. They didn’t open it up and allow everyone to participate in the process. I’m not a politician, and maybe that seemed like the right

way to go at the time, but in retrospect it's clear it just fell apart from the very beginning. I think now we have a chance of doing something if the people in Congress and in the Senate roll up their sleeves and have at it.

Your critics would say you sound more like a lobbyist than a bishop. How do you respond to the charge that this is the kind of thing that's none of the church's business?

I do hear that. Some people have a vision that the church belongs in the church building, dealing only with those things that obviously pertain to the church. But these matters certainly do pertain to the business of the church, because we are here to be a voice for the voiceless and to put a face on the faceless in our society. Matthew 25 is very clear – “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Catholic social teaching is also very clear. This Holy Father, and popes all the way down the line, have spoken about defending the rights of immigrants. Bishops conferences have spoken about it. It goes all the way back to Scripture: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

It's our responsibility to proclaim the Gospel in the public square and to try to move the debate according to our principles. We not only have every right to be in the debate, but we have an obligation. We would be shirking our responsibilities if we didn't do it.

I have to say that the bishops are very united on this point. I keep looking to find if there are some who say that we have to change this or that position, but what I hear is a lot of unanimity.

Yet the reality is that the Catholic grassroots is often quite divided on immigration issues. How can you bring the faithful along with what the leadership is saying?

Last November the bishops voted to refund the Justice for Immigrants program, which I think is very important. Parishes and schools can learn a lot about the situation by drawing on those resources, which are available on-line and in other formats.

At the same time, I also recognize that learning alone is not enough to change hearts. I used to think that if we just put the facts out there people would come around, but now I recognize it's not that simple. We need to get the human stories out, to connect with people on an emotional level. I think that if they heard the real stories of immigrants, the suffering they often endure, people would have a different viewpoint.

I live in Utah, where an elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has a famous saying: “Measure twice, cut once.” It's a good principle. We need to pause, to consider what's really going on. If we simply kick people out, what will they go home to? In many cases, it's misery, poverty, and sometimes political persecution.

I think we also have to look at the theology, the spirituality of immigration, which form the underpinnings of our social teaching. Those points touch people's hearts.

My sense is that the majority of Catholics, like the majority of U.S. citizens, want comprehensive reform. What we hear and see on TV and radio is a very vocal minority, and that's often what the politicians are hearing as well. We need to get our own people to be more vocal about this.

Some Catholics are vocal, but on the other side.

It's true that even among Catholics, some of them look with apprehension at what's happening in the country. There are a lot of misimpressions out there about the impact of

immigration. It's one of those issues that bring out a lot of emotion in people. Hopefully, we can have a reasonable discourse and hash it through. Once we do that, I think most people will see what we need to do.

The reality is that an enforcement-only response – building a 700-mile fence, doubling and tripling border patrols – isn't working, and we know for a fact that it's not working. Even for people who aren't persuaded by the moral arguments, simply on the basis of efficiency there's a need for a new approach. I think a lot of legislators have that understanding.

What we need is real leadership in the Congress and the Senate, not just taking a poll and then making decisions. Both of the candidates for president seem to have decided that immigration reform is too much to tackle right now, but both have expressed positive thoughts regarding immigration in general. For that reason, I'm hopeful that early in the next administration something can be done. I think it has to be done early; it would be a mistake to wait.

What's the most important point you think is missing in the immigration debate?

No matter what side you fall on, I would like to see a lot more compassion. We need to realize that these are human beings we're talking about. We need to talk about the issue soberly, and with compassion.

The theme of the conference I'm attending this week is about hope and justice. Bishop Thomas Wensky [of Orlando, Florida] gave a beautiful homily at one of our Masses in which he said that hope "gives faith a future and love a destiny." I thought that was a perfect way of phrasing things.

We have groups today, such as FAIR or the Minutemen, which use words such as "swarm," "horde," "flood," and "inundation" in talking about immigration. These are disaster words, which have been purposefully conjured up for political ends. They cause immigrants to lose their individuality, their human dignity, their individual face and voice. We need to give them back their face and voice.

One of the best talks at our conference came from a sister who worked with the immigrants affected by the recent raid in Postville, Iowa. It was a very simple talk, but those are often the best. She told the human stories she'd encountered. That's what moves hearts and changes people's positions. Maybe through hearing these stories, more Americans will be led to decide, 'I owe it to somebody to pay back what I've been given.'