

DACA: A Catholic Response to Five Common Concerns

By Kevin Foy - September 07, 2017

Immigration, especially unauthorized immigration, is a controversial issue in the United States. While the US Bishops have released a clear [statement in defense of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#) (DACA), Catholics, too, remain divided. As Catholic missionaries, we in Maryknoll think first and foremost of the people most affected by the issue - those who are living in the United States without legal status. We know them, we work with them, they are our friends and family members, and many of them are fellow Catholics. We are guided by the call to recognize, love, and respond to the presence of Christ in them.



Below, you will find some responses to common concerns and criticisms regarding granting DACA recipients (and other unauthorized immigrants) legal status. Hopefully, these help clarify the context of DACA and the response of the Church to both its repeal and the broader question of unauthorized immigration.

"The Law is the Law"

This is a recurring theme in response to the idea of offering reprieve to unauthorized immigrants, and in this case people who came to the US at a very young age. This position poses a number of problems for us as Catholics, not least of which is that it contradicts the spirit of the Gospel. In Luke Chapter 14, for instance, Jesus asks whether it is lawful to cure on the Sabbath. Facing the silence of legal scholars and Pharisees, he poses the question another way, "Who among you, if your son or ox falls into a cistern, would not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?" (Lk 14:5)

This is not merely rhetoric on the part of Jesus: the Sabbath day of rest is one of the most important laws of his day, yet he repeatedly breaks it in favor of compassion. The Christian tradition is one of continually challenging the laws of the day when they do not accord with our values. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, was inspired by the Gospel to challenge and break multiple laws that we today recognize as unjust. He is honored as a national hero for doing so.

"They Had Plenty of Time to 'Get Legal'"

There is a common misconception that a pathway to citizenship or other legal status exists for Dreamers and many other undocumented people. Sadly, this is rarely the case. DACA was instituted in response to the failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act, which would have offered such a path to a tiny subset of unauthorized immigrants, those that grew up in the United States and have essentially known no other home.

President Trump himself has urged Congress to address the lack of legal status for these young people in a compassionate way, however repealing DACA before any such pathway exists places these young people in limbo, and Congress has shown little political will to address this issue.

"They Should Have Come Here Legally"

In terms of DACA beneficiaries, being minors upon arrival, they by definition had little choice in their coming to the US. The broader question of whether everyone should come here legally is complicated by the fact that our immigration system is notoriously difficult to navigate. Many people who have legitimate claims to asylum or refugee status, for instance, never even make it before an immigration judge because they do not know which part of their story is relevant to share when they are being processed. They also have no legal right to an attorney, so when they do make it before the court they are often unable to make a valid legal claim even if they have one. But even in those many cases where they have no claim under the current laws, they are often fleeing violence, persecution, and/or poverty. Compassion - and the American tradition as a nation of immigrants - challenges us to rethink how we treat the least among us.

"They Should Learn English"

DACA recipients grew up in the US and are of the most culturally assimilated unauthorized immigrants. They are more likely to only speak English. Again, though, we are guided also by the Gospel, which compels us to love the stranger as we love Christ (Mt. 25). We are informed, too, by our history as an immigrant Church. Since this nation's inception, Catholics have left their home countries and built up the Body of Christ in this land. These include Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Mexican, and countless other Catholics who often did not come speaking English but over generations have become integral contributors to US culture. Most US Catholics can trace their roots to an immigrant group, often one that came before the Border Patrol even existed.

"They're Criminals"

In the case of DREAMers, calling them criminals is essentially charging a child as an accomplice to a crime that their parents committed. In the broader context of immigration, we need to remember that laws change based on the values of the society that creates them. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a criminal but would not be so today. Maryknoll priest James Edward Walsh spent 12 years in a Chinese prison after being arrested by Communist authorities. Jesus himself was executed as a criminal by the Romans. For people of faith, morality needs to guide our view of the law, rather than allow the law to dictate what is moral.

About Maryknoll

Maryknoll, a Catholic non-profit mission movement now comprised of four organizations, has been the heart and hands of the U.S. Catholic Church's overseas mission work for more than 100 years.