



**March 15, 2007 - A more humane immigration policy**  
**Op-ed by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley**

**WHENEVER** there is a human tragedy resulting from deeply flawed public policy, as we saw in the immigration raid last week in New Bedford, the immediate response is to seek out the villains.

There surely were multiple layers of illegality, failed policy, and lack of humane vision in the events of last week. The company involved has been accused of violation of federal law; the response of the federal government was problematic at best; and the coordination by state government appears to have been inadequate. Acknowledging all this, I hope our first priority is the families who were impacted, not a search for the villains. It is the case that most of these families are "illegals," people who do not have the proper legal documents to be in the United States. But before they are "illegal," they are human -- women and men with families, hopes and dreams, a determination to find a better life for their children. Their humanity, human dignity, and -- most of all -- their children have the first claim on our conscience as Americans.

Immediate attention should be directed to two issues. First, these events provide another example of why some form of comprehensive immigration reform is needed. President George W. Bush has called for it, Senators Edward Kennedy and John McCain have worked for it, but the objective has been mired in political rhetoric and obstructive tactics at several levels of the political process.

This country has dealt fairly and effectively with immigration policy in the past. The Archdiocese of Boston is populated with the descendants of immigrants. This shared past -- a country shaped from the beginning by those fleeing persecution and poverty -- should give us the foundation to build a future that includes an immigration policy adequate to the needs of our time. It is true that in a globalized economy and an interdependent world, the demands upon policymakers are greater. But, as last week demonstrated, failure to create new immigration policy that recognizes the realities of interdependence will multiply human tragedies.

The other issue that demands attention is the fact that, while immigration reform is urgent, the needs of the women and children in New Bedford are desperate. Their condition is partly the result of a "broken system," but the concrete, crying needs of the most vulnerable people impacted by this raid must be addressed before we set out to fix the system. It is good that steps have been taken by federal and state agencies to respond to the needs of the families that were impacted and that the courts are reviewing this matter.

But I am concerned about some of the principles guiding the response. For example, in order to be released from custody those arrested in New Bedford had to assert that they were "the sole caretaker" of their children. The question is intended to guarantee one parent or caretaker for each child, but reports indicate that this goal has not been met. More important, the question fails to produce an acceptable humanitarian policy. Mothers can be separated from their children, and perhaps deported, as long as there would be a caretaker for the children remaining in Massachusetts.

Immigration law and policy are complex, but a test of "sole caretaker or parent" as the determinant of being able to remain united with one's children fails the test of humane response. That failure is all too well known by the families impacted by the events of last week. A policy that meets the immediate needs of those who were caught up in last week's raid is not yet in place.

There are many concerns that must be given consideration in the process of developing an adequate policy, and this will take time. But we must not lose sight of the human reality. Those who have been detained and those left behind are mothers, fathers, children, wives, husbands, and others responsible for holding families together. At another time in history those people could have been us.

Our shared respect for humanity and our faith in the promise of a better future calls us to do better.

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