Greetings, my friends!

Thank you for your warm welcome and this invitation to speak to you this morning.

I have a lot of respect for Town Hall Los Angeles and your mission. Promoting civic engagement and civic discourse is crucial to our democracy.

What you are doing is truly important. Because as you know, America seems to be becoming more fragmented and polarized. It seems to be getting more difficult for people to talk with those they disagree with. And that’s making it more difficult to find common ground on the big issues we face as a society.

That’s certainly true for the issue that we’re discussing today. Immigration is a difficult issue. Good people disagree on what the challenges are and what we should do about them. And I think we have all noticed that there is an angry, personal tone to our immigration debate that we don’t hear very often in our politics.

My perspective on this issue is that of a pastor. I’m a Catholic priest and a bishop. In fact, I am the Archbishop of the largest Catholic community in the United States. We cover a territory of almost 9,000 square miles here in Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. We estimate our Catholic population to be about 5 million.

In our parishes, schools and other ministries, we serve immigrants — documented and undocumented — every day. We don’t look at them as “clients” or “constituents.” They’re part of our family — our brothers and sisters.

We carry out our ministries in more than 40 languages. We serve about a million people a year, almost all of them living below the poverty line. Not far from here, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels has an extensive outreach to the poor. We serve about 1,200 meals for the homeless a week and provide groceries and clothing to several dozen families. We have an “Adopt a Family” program that helps another 450 families. Our Catholic schools educate about 80,000 students — many of them non-Catholic, a large percentage coming from minority homes, and about a third who are living in poverty.

The Catholic Church here understands what Los Angeles looks like from the “bottom up.” We see L.A. through the eyes of the poor and the vulnerable. Through the eyes of fathers and mothers who are working hard to make a good life for their children.
So that’s my starting point for thinking about the issue of immigration. As many of you know, I’m also an immigrant myself and I’ve been a naturalized American citizen for about 20 years. I was born in Monterrey, Mexico but I have family on my mother’s side who have been in what’s now Texas since 1805. I still have family on both sides of the border.

For me, immigration is a life issue and a family issue. It’s about children. It’s about human dignity. Immigration is also a question about America. About the spirit of our nation, our national soul. What kind of country are we meant to be? What kind of country are we becoming? I wrote a little book about this last year, called “Immigration and the Next America.”

I don’t want to talk about the politics of immigration this morning. As I said, I’m a pastor not a politician. But for me politics is not a negative word. In the Catholic tradition, we see politics as a noble calling, a vocation of service.

Catholics want the same thing for this country that America’s founders wanted — an America that seeks justice for all; that defends the innocent and lifts up the weak; an America that promotes the freedom and dignity of the human person, especially the poor and most vulnerable.

What concerns me is this: When they are talking about immigration reform in Washington and in the media, very few people are talking in these terms. We hear about members of Congress who are facing tough primary challenges and how that effects the “timetable” for legislation. We hear calculations about which party is going to get the “Latino” vote in the next election.

I’m not blaming anybody. My point is that this is not the kind of public discourse that is worthy of our great democracy.

We need to insist that this issue is not about politics or economics. It’s about people. People who are struggling. People who are suffering.

My friends, right now we have fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers dying in the deserts outside our borders. Nobody even knows how many. The government estimates about 6,000 in recent years. Other people say the number is three times that. The point is there are no news stories when somebody dies in the desert. That’s sad and it’s not right.

We also have a permanent underclass that has been growing in our society. Again this is not statistics, but people. We see them every day. They are the people who take care of our children. They are working on our landscapes and cleaning our offices. We see them waiting outside the lumberyard and working on construction projects. They wait on our tables in restaurants and they harvest the food we eat in our homes.
We have grown accustomed to them. Our comfort and our economy depend on these people. They provide millions in tax revenues. But these people are living in the margins of this great country and they have no rights, no security, no health care. And at this moment — they have very little reason to hope that things are ever going to get better. That’s sad and it’s not right.

These are the human faces of immigration reform. And when we look into their eyes we realize how inadequate our politics is.

Now, here’s the tough issue. It’s true that many of these people are here in violation of our laws. They are undocumented immigrants. There are about 11 million in the country right now; about 2.6 million in California, by some estimates.

This is not good. We are a nation of laws and the rule of law is important in every society. In my opinion, we need to find some way to hold undocumented immigrants accountable for breaking our laws. Personally, I think community service and civic education are more constructive than deportation and fines. But we also need to give them a chance to normalize their status and invite them to join us as citizens in building the new America.

The issue is complicated because the people we want to punish have become our neighbors. Most of those we call “illegal” have been living here for five years or more — two-thirds have been here for at least a decade. Almost half are living in homes with a spouse and children.

I’m not a politician or a lawyer — but it seems to me that we need to have some empathy and compassion when we think about this question.

First, our immigration laws aren’t easy to understand. I wrote a whole book on immigration reform and I’m still not sure I understand all of our laws and policies! Second, our government hasn’t been very consistent in enforcing our laws. In fact, for almost twenty years, we chose to look the other way — because we needed these immigrants for our economy.

That’s a difficult truth. And we have to ask ourselves: Is it fair not to enforce our laws for many years, and then suddenly to start punishing people who broke these laws? I don’t think so. But that’s our policy right now.

Here’s another issue we have to think about when we talk about holding people accountable. It can take more than 10 years to get into this country legally. The “waiting lists” are even longer for people who want to come from most Latin American countries.

We need to realize that when we hear politicians say things like, “Illegal immigrants should leave the country and get back in line to enter the country legally.”
When we say that, we’re asking people to make an almost inhuman choice. We’re asking them to choose not to see their children, their loved ones — for maybe a decade or more.

Is that the kind of justice we want? We need to put ourselves in their position. What would we do if we were faced with that kind of a choice? Would we follow a law, if it means maybe never seeing our families again?

These are hard questions that we have to ask ourselves as citizens and as a nation. That’s why I believe immigration reform is a question about our national soul.

America’s founders dreamed of a nation where people from every race, religion and background could live in equality — as brothers and sisters, children of the same God. Their beautiful vision helped make this country a great nation of immigrants — one people made from peoples of many nations.

The question for us today is do we still believe in the dream of America?

Over that last four years, we’ve deported nearly 2 million immigrants. Thousands more have been arrested and are being held in “detention centers” here in Los Angeles and around the country.

In the name of enforcing our laws, we’re breaking up families. We’re punishing kids for the mistakes of their parents. That’s the sad truth – one out of every four people we deport or lock up is being taken away from an intact family. Again, these aren’t just statistics. We’re talking about kids suddenly left without a mom or a dad. I think everyone would agree that this is not the America that our founders dreamed of.

Let me conclude this morning with one more picture of the human face of immigration.

Last week, some children came to our Cathedral. They were carrying letters they had written to Pope Francis. They are asking the Pope to help them — because all of them have parents who have been deported or arrested. They know that Pope Francis himself is the son of an immigrant. They know that he has the heart to understand what they are going through.

I’m forwarding these letters to the Pope. And reading them makes my heart ache. They are so beautiful and so sad. Let me share one written by a young girl named Jersey. It was written in pencil on notebook paper and its includes a drawing of a bird flying free in the sky. It reads:

“Dear Pope Francisco, Today is my birthday. My birthday wish is I would like to have my dad to be with me. …It has been so long that he hasn’t been with me on two of my birthdays, last year and today. … My father works in construction and … every single day he used to come home from work exhausted and tired. The immigration police got him … and will be deporting him. And I wonder what will happen. … Since my father
isn’t here my mom and sister have been trying to find a job. … Since you are the closest to God, I beg you to help my family. Also, pray for my Grandpa Felix because he was very sick and today he passed away. Sincerely, Jersey.”

My friends, this is what immigration is doing to the soul of our country. How we respond to these children is a challenge to our conscience — and it will be a measure of our humanity.

Thank you for listening this morning. I look forward to continuing our conversation.

And may God bless all of you and your families.

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