

# CAPITOL

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# REPORT



The Newsletter of the  
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

## Bishops Issue Immigration Pastoral Letter

Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops are asking Catholics and others to reach out to immigrants and to back comprehensive immigration reform in a pastoral letter released on December 12, the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of the Americas.

In making "Traveling Together in Hope" public, John Huebscher, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), explained that the state's bishops wish to emphasize the importance of affirming human dignity as the nation debates immigration policies.

The bishops recognize that Catholics, like other Americans, are not united on how to respond to immigrants who arrive here illegally. They therefore identify themes in Catholic teaching that can help people balance legal requirements and moral obligations.

"Our *Catechism* addresses directly the duty of wealthy nations like ours to welcome foreigners who are searching for a better life and to respect their natural right to emigrate. At the same time, it recognizes the right of governments to regulate

immigration for the sake of the common good (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., n. 2241). This duty and this right are not incompatible; it is possible to respect both."

The bishops acknowledge that many are deeply troubled that millions of immigrants reside in the U.S. without legal authorization.

"We too share this concern; obeying laws is essential to any stable society. As Americans, however, we have to acknowledge that some of our foreign and domestic policies and practices contribute to the illegal entry of immigrants."

The bishops observe that despite their illegal entry, America's undocumented immigrants, like millions before them, play a vital role in our nation.

"Again and again, America has demonstrated that its highest ideals – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – can be embraced and reinvigorated by people from all around the world who come to our country searching for a better way of life."

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## Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

Hardly a week goes by when one doesn't read a news article or listen to a radio or TV commentary about the lack of civility in political debate, or the severe partisanship that gets in the way of compromise and legislative achievement. It seems I regularly get asked, "How do you advocate in such a polarized environment?"

When I consider that question, I often think of Pope Benedict XV. He was Pope from 1914 to 1922 and much of his papacy coincided with World War I. Faced with such a tragedy and with Catholics serving in armies on both sides, Benedict's stance was one of impartiality. Yet his impartiality pleased no one. Each side accused him of favoring the other.

But impartiality is not the same thing as indifference. Though he didn't take sides, Pope Benedict did what he could to uphold Catholic teaching and lead by example. Acting as a pastor, he encouraged humane treatment of prisoners of war and non-combatants. His plan for peace in 1917 helped inspire President Wilson's "Fourteen Points" proposal, which a year later became the basis for the Armistice.

Thankfully, the intense policy debates of today are nothing like the carnage of a hundred years ago. But the Pope set a worthy example for anyone in a contentious situation: 1) Be faithful to the Gospel message; 2) Be cordial in one's relations to all; and 3) offer constructive suggestions for resolving the disputes of the day.

These are useful lessons for any faithful citizen.



## WCC Opposes Felon Bias

The WCC was among many groups and individuals testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 207 at an October 24 hearing of the Senate Committee on Labor, Public Safety, and Urban Affairs. SB 207 permits employers to terminate or refuse to employ any person convicted of an unpardoned felony. The WCC had earlier expressed similar opposition to an identical proposal in the Assembly.

"The common good is served best when an ex-felon is encouraged to find a good job. Children of ex-felons benefit when their parents are working. Public safety is enhanced as stable employment reduces the risk of recidivism," explained WCC Associate Director Barbara Sella. "Taxpayers save money when the prison population decreases. At-risk youth are given hope when they see ex-felons who are dedicated to honest employment."

Sella noted that the Church's direct ministry to offenders confirms what research has demonstrated, namely that offenders with the best chance of rehabilitation are those who have a caring family, a supportive faith community, and gainful employment.

Sella also noted that SB 207 could disproportionately affect minorities. Though they comprise only about six percent of our state's population, African Americans account for nearly half of our state's prison inmates. "Enacting SB 207 may unwittingly serve to increase disparities for some of our poorest and most marginalized residents."

Sella concluded by saying that Wisconsin's Fair Employment Act (WFEA) strikes the right balance between rehabilitation and public safety. Under the law, employers have the discretion to deny work to those whose past conduct is relevant to their employment.

Other groups opposing SB 207 include Madison-area Urban Ministry, Project Return, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Disability Rights Wisconsin, several labor organizations, the League of Women Voters, and the State Bar of Wisconsin.

## WCC Supports Revising Human Growth and Development Law

The WCC this fall urged support for legislation to provide local districts more flexibility in teaching human growth and development classes, as well as to permit abstinence-based instruction.

In testimony presented at public hearings on October 19 (Senate Bill 237) and November 16 (Assembly Bill 337), WCC Associate Director Barbara Sella urged legislators to support the bills as “measured, tolerant, and inclusive legislation.”

In her testimony, Sella explained that under current law, school districts only have two options: either they must offer comprehensive sex education or nothing at all.

“By contrast, SB 237 and AB 337 give school districts the option of offering 1) comprehensive sex education, 2) abstinence-based sex education, 3) both comprehensive and abstinence-based education, or 4) no instruction. The bills also offer school districts the option of instructing pupils in single-sex courses. Finally, they strengthen local control by revising the composition of the ad hoc advisory committee to ensure that it truly reflects the wishes of the community.”

Sella further noted that the bills foster parental involvement: “Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. These bills offer parents more choices about how they wish to see their children educated, thereby empowering and encouraging them to become more, not less, involved in their children’s lives.”

Sella concluded her testimony by reflecting on the importance of sound education in this area.

“What we teach our children about sexuality today will help determine the kind of society we will live in tomorrow. It is not enough to give children information on staying safe and healthy; they also need formation and guidance. The best sex education is not just about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The best education teaches children to develop their unique character and potential, to increase their self-worth and self-restraint, and to grow in their capacity for love and responsibility. Intelligent and compassionate instruction helps students learn from past mistakes and change potentially damaging behavior.”

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“Just as we work to protect the innocent unborn, 40 million of whom have already lost their lives, so we cannot turn our backs on the 12 million immigrants in our midst who long to live freely and fully.”

The bishops conclude by calling on all Catholics to support a path to citizenship that includes restitution where it is owed.

“Let us then commit ourselves to helping resolve this pressing immigration crisis. We do so not just for

our nation’s sake, but also for the sake of millions of children and adults who live fearfully in the shadows, who are vulnerable to exploitation, whose family members are being cruelly isolated, detained, and deported.”

A *Question and Answer* resource accompanies the letter. English and Spanish versions of both documents are available on the WCC website at [www.wisconsincatholic.org](http://www.wisconsincatholic.org).

**CAPITOL REPORT** is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC’s activities and positions on state and federal legislation.

### Wisconsin Catholic Conference

131 W. Wilson Street, Suite 1105  
Madison, WI 53703  
Phone: 608/257-0004 Fax: 608/257-0376  
E-mail: [office@wisconsincatholic.org](mailto:office@wisconsincatholic.org)  
Website: [www.wisconsincatholic.org](http://www.wisconsincatholic.org)

### WCC Staff

John Huebscher, Executive Director  
Cathy Coyle-Kaufmann, Administrative Assistant  
Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life/Social Concerns  
Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Education/Health Care

## Bishops Issue Guidance on Conceal and Carry Law

As Wisconsin's law permitting people to carry concealed weapons took effect on November 1, 2011, Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops urged Catholics to reflect deeply on the issues at stake.

The letter, which was signed by all five diocesan bishops, does not mandate that parishes prohibit concealed weapons, but it does advise parishioners to "seriously consider not carrying them into church buildings as a sign of reverence for these sacred spaces."

"The right to bear arms is protected under our Constitution, but like all rights it must be exercised responsibly and in accordance with applicable laws," they wrote.

"We are obligated to use this particular freedom with due respect for others and for the desires of those who welcome us into their homes, places of business, and other public spaces, such as churches and religious institutions."

The bishops also urged Catholics to reflect on Catholic teaching, with its preference for non-violence.

"While the Church has always upheld the right to self-defense, peaceful means of reconciling conflicts and differences, both as individuals and nations, is the preferred method," they said.

"We think of Jesus who told His disciples 'to put their

sword away' rather than to act violently to defend Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. We think of the many Catholic martyrs who suffered violence and death for the sake of the Gospel, praying for their killers as Jesus did on the cross. Some of these martyrs were actually killed in churches, such as Thomas Becket, Wenceslaus, and Josaphat."

"The Catholic Church has a long tradition of sanctuary, allowing people fleeing violence to take refuge in church buildings as a place of safety and protection. For the most part, this practice has worked well because most people respect the sacred, peaceful nature of such holy places."

The bishops urged pastors and others who exercise leadership in parishes and religious institutions to consider these factors in determining whether to prohibit concealed weapons in parishes and other buildings owned by the Church and Catholic organizations.

"This decision should be firmly grounded in our teaching and made with due regard for the pastoral reality and customs of the local community," they wrote.

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