

## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### **THE ASPIRATIONS, NOT THE CREDENTIALS, OF IMMIGRANTS STRENGTHEN OUR NATION**

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

The current debate over immigration policy raises questions that are intertwined with our identity and character as a nation. The story of immigrants is our story. The issues we are engaging in this debate invite us to look in a mirror to recall not only who we are today, but how we got here.

One of the hot button topics in today's debate is that of who among the 11 million or more undocumented immigrants should be placed at the "the head of the line" in granting a path to legal status. Some argue that we should give preference to those with advanced degrees or who have skills that are in demand in our economy. In short, we should prefer those who are "good investments."

Such a policy choice may be popular, especially when we are tempted to measure the worth of a person by the size of his wallet or earning potential. But that is not what we celebrate when we tell our national story.

We may be governed by laws, regulations, and court opinions. But we look elsewhere to give expression to the values and ideals that define our American character. The Declaration of Independence is one place we look. The Gettysburg Address is another.

So too is the poem by Emma Lazarus, enshrined at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It is in these verses we find the essence of why our nation appeals to so many in other lands. She concludes her poem with these words:

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Our history of welcoming immigrants is not one of calling out to those with advanced degrees, to entrepreneurs, to those with solid references. Lady Liberty does not lift her lamp to elites with connections. Rather, her invitation is to the "wretched refuse" of other nations, to those of modest means and undistinguished pedigrees. Such people are, after all, our own ancestors. Few arrived speaking perfect English. They didn't have business plans. What these huddled masses did have was the "yearning to breathe free" and the dream of making a better life for themselves and their children. It was those yearnings and those aspirations and the potential they realized that built our nation.

In recounting the birth of Jesus in his book, *The Life of Christ*, Bishop Fulton Sheen wrote that “divinity is where you least expect to find it.” As we approach this Christmas time, we should consider that insight along with the words of Emma Lazarus as we decide to whom we will “lift our lantern” in writing the next chapter of our immigration policy.

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