

# When it comes to immigration, America suffers from amnesia

BY CARDINAL JOSEPH WILLIAM TOBIN — 02/21/18 04:30 PM EST

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America has a storied history. Over the years, we have been bolstered by steady levels of family immigration, which has helped build communities, revitalize local economies, invest in small businesses and promote integration. This rich history forms the fabric of these United States, yet far too often, our nation experiences amnesia when it comes to reckoning with our immigrant roots.

Over the past year, the level of vitriol directed to undocumented families has been astonishing. Elected officials proclaim their hardline stance on immigration as a badge of honor, even as some proclaim to be people of faith.

From President Trump's ban on migration for persons from Muslim-majority countries, to his decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, to his insistence on erecting a border wall to divide America from Mexico, we are witnessing an escalating display of hatred for undocumented individuals and families. We have stopped seeing the faces of our immigrant brothers and sisters, and the stories behind their faces.

Political rhetoric aside, the number of family-based immigrants admitted to the U.S. each year is not unchecked — it is limited by Congress. Due to congressional limits on migration, very rarely do family members who wish to come to the U.S. have the ability to simply apply for and receive a visa in a reasonable time period. Instead, families wait years and sometimes decades to be able to reunite with loved ones. The underdeveloped narrative in the migrant experience is that many migrants to the U.S. are seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

The irony of all of this is that many Americans hold immigrants to a standard that we ourselves do not comply.

Each of us, unless we are native American, has someone in our bloodline who migrated to this country. The most immediate chapter of my own immigration story began just after World War I in County Kerry, Ireland when Molly Sullivan, a courageous 17-year-old girl and, eventually, my paternal grandmother, travelled to Boston longing for a better life. When my father and uncles offered to pay her way back to Ireland, I'm told she said, all "All I knew there was poverty; you go back."

While my grandmother's story is special to my family, it is not vastly different from the countless immigration stories of people coming from Ireland, Poland and Italy in the past, or those arriving from Mexico, India, and the Philippines today. For the overwhelming majority of us, this is how we became Americans — our families sought a better life and that life brought us to this country.

That's why it pains me to see the acrimonious debate involving undocumented youth. They were brought to this country as children, and now they're being forced to leave to score political points. We use the broad category of "Dreamers," but we should remove the statistics and highlight the faces and stories of those impacted by what can be perceived as open season on immigrants.

We're at a crucial point. The March 5 end of DACA is just days away. As undocumented youth ponder their fate, they are being portrayed in the media as pawns in a larger game. Elected officials and some in the media throw around new phrases to describe Dreamers such as "chain migration." There is nothing more harmful or hurtful to describe the human migration experience and its importance to society than to use a term such as "chain migration."

It is clear we're a country that refuses to look at our own immigrant experience. But as a leader within the Catholic church, I am compelled to speak up.

There is a strong tradition in the social teaching of our church on the fundamental value and inherent rights of the family. Our vocal support of immigrants is rooted in our principles and in our history in this country. We welcome immigrant families not because their faith is our faith — we'll go to the mat for immigrants from Muslim, Hindu or any other faith tradition being persecuted — but because it's the right thing to do.

And when I think about right and wrong, I think about my family. I'm the eldest of 13 siblings. My dad taught me to protect my sisters and brothers from bullies, and I took his admonition to heart. In the same way that I would protect my brothers and sisters from those seeking to harm them, I am committed to protecting those whom some in our society seek to reduce to mere "deportable" statistics.

For members of Congress who follow the Judeo-Christian tradition, I remind them of the millennial prohibition against persecuting the stranger as well as the fact that Jesus and his family were refugees. While I don't recall Jesus chastising people for overtly persecuting the poor, he did condemn the failure to see the poor for who they really are and for failing to see the fullness of their circumstances.

My message to Congress and Americans who have forgotten their own immigrant story is simple: Look again and truly "see" Dreamers, and then act in the best traditions of our history and of our faith.

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