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FUNDAMENTALLY EQUAL!

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May 17, 2021

It is a sign of our times: the situation of millions of men and women, the elderly, young people and children who, in today's world, feel forced or are compelled to leave their places of origin, their villages or nations, for many and varied reasons, including conflicts, violence, administrative corruption, unemployment, natural disasters, and political persecution. They leave to immigrate and take refuge in other places on earth in search of better living conditions. This sign of our times cries out to the heavens and becomes a disgrace for humanity because—in the vast majority of cases—the national governments in the countries of origin and destination of the migratory waves have not found or given dignified, humane, and definitive solutions to the serious humanitarian problem that the phenomenon represents.

We would say that this is, if not the largest, one of the most significant and worst tragedies that humanity faces today in the many corners of this planet. The United States does not escape this phenomenon. On the contrary, this nation—throughout its history—has been one of the main points of attraction for large waves of immigrants.

From the first day of his Pontificate, Pope Francis has shown great human sensitivity, an enormous concern, and interest in the subject and the grave situation of the world's immigrants. Through a massive number of messages and interventions, he has taught us that to face and give a humane and adequate solution to the problem we must first resolve our fears and prejudices; our intolerances and inner walls; open ourselves in compassion and love to all; be capable of empathy for our fellow human beings; be capable of respect, justice, and mercy for all human beings, for those who are fundamentally equal to us in everything; be capable of not excluding and not discriminating against anyone and of putting the least among us first, of creating spaces of dignity for the "discarded" and those who suffer most in our societies; be capable of building the world as a great table and the earth as our home, the home of all.

For more than three decades in this nation, we have advocated for a radical and definitive solution to the issue of undocumented immigration, represented by the millions of men and women who, right now and for decades, have arrived in this country, seeking better living conditions for right now and in the future, for both themselves and their families, here and in their places of origin, contributing their work to the development and progress of this great nation.

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But, without regulation and documentation allowing them to live and function as citizens with all their human and civil rights protected by law and the constitution, they are forced to live in the shadows, as in an underworld, a subculture, in which millions of men, women and entire families of undocumented immigrants live subjected to uncertainty, abuses, persecutions, discriminations, labor exploitation, social marginalization, lack of opportunities and free access to social benefits and all kinds of injustices and violence, etc.

Right now, and for decades, the United States has been an example of democracy, respect for the law, and human rights for the world. The inhumane, unequal and unjust situation in which millions of undocumented immigrants live in this country is hypocritical and contradicts the founding principles of this nation and the Constitution that governs us. Therefore, we must reach a humane, dignified, reasonable, concerted, integral, definitive, and prompt solution without further truces or delays. To continue without solving this important sociopolitical issue is to prolong an unsustainable and inhumane situation, postpone dignified living conditions for millions of people, and to continue the national shame that this situation means for this nation before the eyes of the world.

All the parties and governments that in past decades have led the life of this nation have spoken of immigration as a priority issue in the electoral, economic, cultural, political, and social spheres. But the solution has not come. It is not coming. This is indeed an issue of enormous complexity due to the many sides and dimensions it contains and implies. On the part of politicians, it has become a popular issue and one of opportunism and electoral convenience that must be kept active.

On the part of employers, legal solutions that would force them to fairly pay their employees more do not suit them. On the part of the American people, there are many fears and prejudices (superiority or inferiority complexes, racial and cultural biases, labor fears) that allow them to reject and discriminate instead of accepting and welcoming them. On the part of undocumented immigrants—because they forget what is important to solve what is urgent: providing an immediate solution to their economic needs—they abandon more critical struggles for their better long-term living conditions and turn their stay in the country into an economic advantage instead of an integration with the new nation that welcomes them. On the part of the rulers of the nations sending immigrants: a definitive solution in the United States for their immigrant populations solves their problems and alleviates their negligence and administrative corruption.



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But it is precisely the complexity of this issue that challenges our greatness as a nation so that, above all, through frank, open dialogue and national consensus, we can find a humane, dignified, and comprehensive solution. A solution for everything and everyone. A solution that recognizes every human dimension of each undocumented immigrant (housing, education, employment, political, social, and cultural integration into American society, etc.), their families, and all immigrants coming from the most diverse nations present in this country.

The vast majority of undocumented immigrants are noble and good men and women, selfless workers, deserving of a better life, who crossed the border or stayed to live in this country for many years without the required documentation, men and women who pay taxes, but do not see their efforts and contributions to the nation's progress rewarded with laws and social benefits. Yet, they choose to endure the new abuses to which our country subjects them rather than return to the worse living conditions they left behind. And as in every society and human community, there is also an undeniably immense minority among them who add, to their undocumented status, the status of illegal aliens for infractions to the laws or crimes they commit.

The entire nation must pay real attention to this serious problem. We must legalize the situation of millions of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Any abuse, inequity, and injustice that continues to occur on our soil will remind us that we have not been capable, that we have not done well, and that our leaders, politicians, and rulers were not and are not up to addressing the circumstances and the demands of our life as a nation. We need more proposals and fewer protests.

We must work together to overcome—once and for all—this stain and shame on our existence as an American people. The United States cannot continue to be a nation with first-, fifth- and last-class inhabitants. All inhabitants of the United States, fundamentally equal, must live in equity and justice, with equal living conditions for all and equal access to the same benefits and social opportunities.

Mario J. Paredes is the CEO of SOMOS Community Care: a network of 2,500 independent physicians—mostly primary care physicians— who serve nearly one million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients.