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OP-ED

**COVID Crisis Exposes the Need for a Legalization of the
Nation's Immigrants**

Friday, May 15, 2020– The coronavirus pandemic has brought our nation suffering and pain and has shown us that we are all mortal. The virus knows no boundaries and can attack any person, regardless of their ethnicity, race or nationality. My prayers are with all who have been harmed by this crisis.

The pandemic has also revealed that immigrant workers, who dwell on the margins of society, are present on the front lines of this battle, risking their own well-being to serve the nation at a time of crisis.

They are health-care workers and first responders helping victims of the virus to survive. They are agricultural workers laboring in America's fields, meatpacking plants, and canneries, ensuring that we maintain our food supply. And they are employees at the local grocery store or restaurant and food delivery persons, bringing food to our tables.

The large majority possess tenuous legal status or are without legal status. They include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients, temporary workers on time-limited visas, and the undocumented. Without their hard work, our state and nation would be in a more precarious position today.

In New Mexico, immigrants work in vital industries and help keep our economy afloat. According to a recent report by several New Mexico immigrant rights organizations, there are over 15,000 immigrant-owned businesses in the state. Immigrants—both legal and undocumented—pay \$393 million in state and local taxes a year. Nearly 22 percent of the employees in the restaurant industry in New Mexico are foreign-born.

Nationally, at least one-half of farmworkers and one-third of workers in America's meatpacking and poultry plants are undocumented. They have been classified as essential workers, but toil in dangerous working conditions. We would not have food in our stores at this critical time without them.

Nevertheless, legal and undocumented workers have been unable to obtain governmental assistance to help survive this crisis. Legal immigrants are afraid to access unemployment payments and other public services because of the public charge rule recently adopted by the Trump administration. DACA and TPS recipients, who contribute as essential workers in the health-care and food industries, have been unable to get their work authorizations extended, leaving them unable to support their families.

Moreover, mixed-status families—which include at least one undocumented person—have been excluded from direct cash payments under the CARES Act. In New Mexico, two-thirds of immigrants live in mixed-status families.

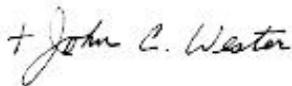
Undocumented workers do not qualify for Medicaid and fear receiving treatment for COVID-19, leaving them at higher risk for contracting the virus. Undocumented workers also are not eligible for direct cash payments or unemployment insurance.

Ironically, the importance of immigrant workers to our state and nation has been tacitly confirmed by the Trump administration, which excluded medical workers and agricultural laborers from its short-sighted ban on the issuance of green cards. They also saw the wisdom of excluding from the ban hard-working immigrants already in the country and all workers on temporary visas. Yet they take every opportunity to scapegoat immigrants, divide their families, and exploit the pandemic to deny them their rights, including the right to asylum.

The inconsistency—or should I say hypocrisy—of our immigration system in this country is being exposed by this crisis. At the same time, some of our leaders attempt to score political points on the backs of immigrants, while our country benefits from their life-saving work. As a moral matter, this cannot stand.

My hope is that one outcome of this crisis is that, as a nation, we see the contributions of immigrants with new eyes and develop a greater appreciation for their contributions to our society.

Rather than relegating them to a hidden underclass, we should bring them out of the shadows by putting them on a path to citizenship. They have earned it.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John C. Wester". The signature is written in black ink and includes a small cross symbol at the beginning.

Most Reverend John C. Wester
Archbishop of Santa Fe