

Notes after the June meeting of bishops

Bishop Doherty

My work as elected chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People has given me an opportunity to help ourselves and every diocese. What makes it engaging are the experts, advocates and victims I have talked to during the past year. Thursday morning conference calls keep me involved. The committee's day-to-day responsibilities are done by the four-person staff of the Secretariat for the Protection of Children at the USCCB office in Washington, D.C. It takes faith and grace to execute this ministry on a daily basis. The reader can find more detail in the 2017 annual report, just issued, at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/2017-Report.pdf>

This 74-page report is a good start to answering the question, "What has the Church in our country done about abuse lately?" And over the past 16 years.

Immigration issues, or rather "people," were central to many private and public discussions. For the bishops on our borders, these are more about helping suffering people than about crafting advocacy statements. As a disciple, it is one thing to ask myself which "side" of an issue I support. It is another to look at human beings who will long survive me and ask how I can help them.

There are two parts of this immigration conversation that we should remember. No bishop that I have heard publicly or privately has ever endorsed the idea of an "open border." Yet the opposite "fake news" is repeated in order to take us out of the serious moral debate about immigration reform and refugee resettlement. We are respecters of laws who, like every other citizen, have a responsibility to promote updating laws and regulations as situations change.

If you read the letters of St. Paul straight through, you will discover that he was fighting false news and rumors in his day.

A second part has to do with a reading of history on our continent. A large percentage of people who Midwesterners might think to be immigrants or their descendants are not. They were in these territories before they were annexed.

My grade school and high school history books taught that American settlement started in New England and moved west and south. The facts point otherwise. Father Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, is one of many to remind us that a Franciscan missionary died on the plains of Kansas long before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. The oldest Christian congregation in the "lower 48 states" began at the Catholic parish at Spanish-founded St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565. And much of the United States' present southwest, Texas through California, was the northern third of Mexico until the territory was annexed following the Mexican-American War, 1845-1848. A part of our continuing story is the history of the treatment of Native Americans, which is interwoven through all of this.

It is hard work to reframe laws and historical narrative at the same time, but one requires the other. This came into clear focus during my taxi ride to the New Orleans airport on June 5. My African-American driver was well informed about why Confederate monuments, erected in the early 1900s, were being removed or moved. Those monuments were intentionally erected to restate the superiority of one race over another. Some now rate as a classic New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu's 2017 speech about why statues needed to come down. While we were talking about changes in the city, my driver wanted to confirm that I knew about their new mayor, LaToya Cantrell, the first woman to lead this city in its 300 years.

The bishops worked on and learned about many other issues, ranging from translations of prayers to evangelization strategies to religious freedom. There was progress on statements about overcoming racism and about the contributions of Asian and Islander Catholic communities in the United States.

The last morning always starts with an early concelebrated Mass, Benediction, a holy hour with a guided reflection by one bishop, and an opportunity to go to confession to priests from the local area. By the end of these meetings, if I may speak for myself, I have a great sense about "what I have done and what I have failed to do." And so the end of the meeting becomes a graced beginning as I make my way back to our local Church.