

JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

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Is Amnesty a Dirty Word?

Louisiana chooses amnesia over amnesty

by Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

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JSRI Upcoming Events

October 16

Fr. Kammer will meet with the Social Justice and Outreach Focus Team of the Archdiocesan Synod.

October 23-25

JSRI is co-sponsoring [the 5th Conference on Immigration to the US South](#) at the University of Florida. Dr. Weishar will do two panel presentations.

November 7-8

The JSRI Advisory Board will meet on the Loyola campus.

JSRI Recent Activities

October 7

Dr. Mikulich led a lunch discussion about anti-racism efforts on Loyola's campus for students and faculty.

October 1-3

Dr. Weishar and Ms. Baudouin attended the Fall Meeting of the Interfaith Center for Corporate

How is it that in Louisiana, a state with a rapidly diminishing coastline, the highest incarceration rate in the world, and a crumbling infrastructure, “amnesty” for “illegal aliens” is the issue dominating political ads in the U.S. Senate race? This in the same state that announced a [tax amnesty](#) for delinquent taxpayers on September 12. In April the [New Orleans Municipal Court](#) announced an amnesty plan to encourage thousands of residents to come to court to avoid being arrested on outstanding misdemeanor warrants. Amnesty is a time-tested public policy strategy to clean the slate and give people a fresh start. Why has “amnesty” for undocumented immigrants become such a dirty word?

Anyone with a working set of eyeballs could see that Latino workers were essential to the state's recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina. Although at the time no one was very interested in asking about the legal status of the workers doing the dirty, dangerous work of digging south Louisiana out of the smelly gray muck that blanketed the region, [researchers from Tulane and Berkeley](#) universities did inquire. They found that half the reconstruction workforce at the height of disaster recovery in March 2006 was Latino, and that half of those workers were undocumented. You might think that a state that has benefited so substantially from the labor of undocumented immigrants might be more open to the concept of amnesty. Instead we've opted for amnesia.



participated in a dialog on implementing human rights policies in private prisons.

September 24-25

Dr. Mikulich and Mr. Bustamante attended the the Southern Regional Asset Building Coalition 7th Annual Conference where Mr. Bustamante presented *Paycheck to Payday: Florida Data*.

September 24

Mr. Bustamante spoke with [LRN Miami](#) on a recent Brookings report on greater investment in English instruction for immigrants.

September 23

Dr. Weishar participated in "Understanding the Border Crisis" on Loyola's campus.

September 15

Mr. Bustamante commented on [Florida hospitality workers' wages](#) in a *Tampa Bay Times* article.

September 15

JSRI co-sponsored [the address of Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J.](#), author of *Tattoos on the Heart*.

September 13

Dr. Weishar facilitated a panel discussion on unaccompanied children at the border for the [Gillespie Memorial Community Breakfast](#).

The senate candidates' political ads condemning amnesty for undocumented immigrants are full of untruths and ironies that would be laughable if the future of so many vulnerable families were not at stake.

First of all, none of the senate candidates have said or done anything that would indicate support of amnesty for undocumented immigrants, i.e. an automatic pardon with no consequences for living in the U.S. without documents. It is important to note, however, that [leaders of both parties](#) have long called for "earned legalization" for undocumented immigrants with family and community roots and no criminal offenses, requiring applicants to pay hefty fines, demonstrate proficiency in English, and go to the "end of the line" to wait for a permanent visa.

Ironically, in 1986 President Ronald Reagan--the man so many of our state's politicians seek to emulate-- signed into law a successful legalization program for undocumented immigrants known as amnesty. One of the many positive consequences of President Reagan's amnesty program was that the wages (and tax contributions) of amnesty beneficiaries increased 15% after earning legal status.[1]

Finally, [most Louisianans claim to be Christian](#). Amnesty implies pardon or forgiveness. A willingness to forgive others is essential to taking on the mind and heart of Christ. The late Fr. Jerry Fagin, S.J., wrote about forgiveness in his meditation on the *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, entitled *Putting on the Heart of Christ*: "A spirit of reconciliation and the commitment to forgive others is at the heart of the Christian message. It is a virtue that is central to living the Christian life... Our readiness to forgive others is a sign that God's forgiveness has truly transformed our hearts." [2]

Why can't Christians "forgive" immigrants who entered the U.S. without documentation, especially since we clearly need their labor and our dysfunctional immigration system provides almost no way for low skilled workers to enter legally?

To make matters worse, images of poor migrants clinging to U.S. bound trains and hundreds of Latino children sleeping on the floors of Border Patrol centers angered and frightened Americans with nativist tendencies. Have those reactions given rise to politicians' sudden obsession with condemning amnesty for undocumented immigrants?

[1] Shirley Smith, Roger Kramer, and Audrey Signer, Characteristics and Labor Market Behavior of the Legalized Population Five Years Following Legalization, Bureau of Internation Labor Affairs, U.S. Department of Labor, May 1996.

[2] Gerald M. Fagin, S.J., Putting on the Heart of Christ: How the Spiritual Exercises Invite Us to a Virtuous Life, Loyola Press, Chicago, 2010, pp. 70-73.

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