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Opening Remarks:
Immigration Forum with Congressman Jared Polis

Northglenn, Colorado, June 13, 2009

Thank you all for coming today. Let's settle our hearts for a moment and begin with a prayer:

Lord, you created men and women in your image and endowed them with your dignity. You call each of us to be agents of your justice and mercy in the world. Help us to build a culture of life – a culture that holds all human life in reverence, from the unborn child and the immigrant, to the poor, the homeless, the infirm and the elderly. Give us the character to live the Gospel not just with our words, but with our hearts and our actions. Make us quick to forgive each other, quick to listen to each other, and eager to serve those who are suffering and in need. And finally Lord, in all things, fill us with the courage to follow St. Paul when he urges us to "speak the truth in love." We ask this trusting in your goodness and in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have a lot to cover in a short time on an important issue, so I'll be brief. But I do want to start by thanking Father Greg Ames for his generosity in making his parish available to us today. Father Greg has the heart of a real pastor, and I'm very grateful for his support. I'm also very grateful to Congressmen Polis and Gutierrez for having the courage to put this issue back in front of the public.

Immigration reform in this country has been gridlocked for more than three years, and both Democrats and Republicans have created that paralysis. We made our immigration crisis in a bipartisan way. Now we need to solve it in a bipartisan way that involves good people from both parties or no party; and people who may have very different convictions. I'm pretty confident that Congressman Polis and I would agree that we disagree – vigorously – on some very serious social issues. But those issues aren't on the agenda today. What's on the agenda today is finding a way to make our immigration laws better. We have a mutual interest in that important work -- and I respect the congressman's sincerity and energy in trying to do something about it.

This morning I celebrated Mass at a Hispanic prolife congress here in the archdiocese. It was a very good prologue to our gathering today. The Catholic commitment to the dignity of the immigrant comes from exactly the same roots as our commitment to the dignity of the unborn child. Any Catholic who truly understands his or her faith knows that the right to life precedes and creates the foundation for every other human right. There's no getting around the priority of that fundamental right to life. But being "prolife" also means that we need to make laws and social policies that will care for those people already born that no one else will defend.

In the United States today, we employ a permanent underclass of human beings who build our roads, pick our fruit, clean our hotel rooms, and landscape our lawns. Most of these men and women, like millions of immigrants before them, abide by our laws and simply want a better life for their families. Many have children who are American citizens, or who have been in America so long that they don't know any other homeland. But they live in a legal limbo. They're vital to our economy, but they have few legal protections, and thousands of families have been separated by arrests and deportations.

We need to remember that how we treat the weak, the infirm, the elderly, the unborn child and the foreigner reflects on our own humanity. We become what we do, for good or for evil. The Catholic Church respects the law, including immigration law. We respect those men and women who have the difficult job of enforcing it. We do not encourage or help anyone to break the law. We believe Americans have a right to solvent public institutions, secure borders and orderly regulation of immigration.

But we can't ignore people in need, and we won't be quiet about laws that don't work — or that, in their "working," create impossible contradictions and suffering. Despite all of the heated public argument over the past few years, Americans still find themselves stuck with an immigration system that adequately serves no one. We urgently need the kind of immigration reform that will address our economic and security needs, but will also regularize the status of the many decent undocumented immigrants who help our society to grow. A new Congress and a new president now serve in Washington. They have an extraordinary opportunity to act quickly and justly to solve this problem.

We become what we do, for good or for evil. If we act and speak like bigots, that's what we become. If we act with justice, intelligence, common sense and mercy, then we become something quite different. We become the people and the nation God intended us to be. Our country's immigration crisis is a test of our humanity. Whether we pass it is entirely up to us. That's why this gathering is important. That's why we're here today. And that's why I hope all of you will take part in this national work for immigration reform as vigorously and unselfishly as possible. The future of our country depends on it.

Thanks, and God bless you.