I would like to thank Archbishop Gregory and Bishop Zarama for hosting this conference and inviting me to be part of it. I also would like to thank Ambassador Johnny Young, executive director of MRS, and Don Kerwin, acting executive director of CLINIC, for their leadership. Finally, I would like to thank of you for your attendance and for your commitment to our immigrant brothers and sisters in our country and beyond.

We are at a pivotal moment in our nation’s history, as our country is more diverse than ever. We are truly an immigrant nation, made up of peoples from all parts of the world which are now, or long to be, Americans. This is also an important moment for our church, which is also growing in her diversity and which continues to welcome immigrants from all over the globe, all of us sharing our Catholic faith in its full richness.

We have an opportunity in 2013 to help improve the situations of immigrants to our land, many of whom share our pews each Sunday but also wash our clothes, clean our homes, and pick and prepare our food. Since the recent election, there appears to be an opening in Washington to finally reform our nation’s immigration system and bring 11 million of our brothers and sisters out of the shadows. The Catholic community around the nation, led by the bishops, can play an instrumental role in making humane reform a reality. As a member of the USCCB Committee on Migration and as chairman of the USCCB Committee on Communications, I would like to share with you some thoughts about how the Catholic message on immigrants and immigration
reform can become a central part of the debate, and how specifically we can make the moral argument for immigration reform.

First, the Church must play a role in setting the terms of the upcoming debate in a positive and humane manner. As you are all aware, recent public debates about immigration have been characterized by divisive rhetoric and what I would call the de-humanization of the immigrant. From some in the debate, immigrants are not human beings, like you and I, they are (and I quote) “illegals.” The Church must continue to fight this rhetoric and remind our fellow Americans of the humanity of the immigrant, both through our personal stories and the language we use. It is the Church and the faith community that can counter the vitriol and inject civility and respect into the debate about immigration. Immigrants share our common values of community, hard work, family, and worship of God. They also share the aspirations and goals for their children and families, as we all do. They should be treated with respect.

There are other terms in the debate that we must do a better job of defining so that a positive message can be heard. Plus, the use of language can have an impact on policy outcomes. For example, the term the “rule of law” has been used to showcase immigrants as lawbreakers. But the “rule of law” also implies the implementation of a set of laws that are just and equally enforced, ones that are workable and that protect basic due process rights. In this sense, our mission is to restore the “rule of law” into our immigration system, which currently lacks these principles.
Similarly, some use the term “secure the border” as an axiom for enforcement first and enforcement only. The term has been invoked to prevent reform of the entire system, since there is no consensus on the definition of a “secure border.” Terms such as “protecting the integrity of our borders” and “maintaining control” of our borders are more reflective of reality and create the space for the discussion of other parts of our immigration system and, eventually, for compromise. We cannot allow language to prevent passage of a bill or limit its scope and positive provisions.

Let me be clear. As a church, we must do a better job communicating to fellow Catholics and others about the issue of enforcement. We do uphold the right of the sovereign to protect its borders, and enforcement is a necessary component of any immigration system. But our nation must impose enforcement penalties commensurate to the violation. Undocumented presence should not expose a person to lengthy detention in substandard conditions, little or no rights in court, or physical or emotional abuse. Enforcement should be used as an incentive for persons to use legal means for entry and to obtain permanent residency, provided those avenues are available and accessible. This will both protect them and create a viable immigration system. Currently, there are not viable legal avenues for persons to migrate and work, despite the demand for their labor, and we have created an incongruent system, with a “keep out” sign at our border and a “help wanted” sign in the workplace.

And, of course, one of the debate’s most controversial terms, “amnesty,” has become a lightning rod for rewarding law breaking. This is certainly not the case, as any program would require immigrants to pay a fine and get in the back of the line, which is reflected in the term “path to
citizenship.” But, as Church, we also should underscore the idea of forgiveness and compassion, virtues which are often lost in this debate. We are a compassionate country, and we should not shy away from reminding our fellow Americans of that fact.

Besides trying to set the terms of the debate to impact positive policy outcomes, the Church’s central role in the debate is to communicate the moral argument for immigration reform. What is that argument, you ask? Simply put, as a nation we cannot accept the benefits of the undocumented workers and their families—their hard work to help our economy and their contributions to our communities—yet fail to offer them the protections of our laws. We cannot have it both ways.

Because of their inherent human dignity and God-given rights, we cannot continue to expose them to exploitation, abusive workplace conditions, excessive detention, family separation, and even possible death in the desert. Often our nation is indifferent to such abuse of immigrants because the immigrants, as I said, have been de-humanized. The argument made by opponents has, for the time being, won the day: these immigrants “have broken the law” and therefore have put themselves in such a position, so it is not ours, and the nation’s, responsibility. The Church’s mission is to convince our fellow Americans that how our brothers and sisters are, regardless of their legal status, our nation’s responsibility and should be treated humanely, if only for the sake of our shared humanity.

Moral issues will permeate the policy choices in any new immigration bill. One challenge ahead, as Archbishop Gregory mentioned in his talk, is the question of whether immigrants who
are conferred legal status would be eligible for a path to citizenship. Some may argue that because they did not come through the regular (broken) channels, they should not be eligible for citizenship, at least a special path to citizenship. However, such an outcome would limit the rights of those persons and sanction a permanent underclass in our society, a road we have gone down before in this country, to devastating effects. They would be unable to fully participate in the political and community life of our nation and would effectively become marginalized and powerless. This is not the American way. Besides, the path to citizenship upon which they would embark is not an easy one and would take several years—do we not want persons who are willing to take that path to become U.S. citizens, who cherish that benefit so much? Would we want them to become full members of our communities and a nation?

Another challenge in the debate will be the preservation of family unity as the cornerstone of our nation’s immigration system. The family-based immigration system remains at risk, as some have tried to make it a more employment-based system. The Church and others must remind Americans how families—immigrant families—have helped build this country and strengthen its social fabric.

Finally, the Church must broaden the solutions for undocumented migration. We do not support undocumented migration, for it is good neither for the undocumented immigrant nor society. But the answer to undocumented migration is not just enforcement, such as the completion of a border wall, but broader policies which allow for the legal entry of future migrants—a worker program—and look at the root causes of migration. How do our economic policies impact migration? What policies should we pursue that allow persons to remain in their home countries
and support their families in dignity? These questions should be part of the national debate, if not part of the solution.

I am confident that the Catholic community, using these benchmarks and others, can play an important role in the immigration reform debate and help produce legislation of which we, and our nation, can be proud.

In conclusion, let me leave you with some words of encouragement. I know many of who have been working hard on this issue for years, and the lack of movement can be frustrating. But I believe we are at a point in our country where are elected officials, reflecting the wishes of the people, are ready to act. This is due in no small part to your efforts, and I congratulate you. Also know that your voice and the voice of the Church, although criticized or dismissed by some, will be heard, and, in the end, help us win a victory in the next year on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters.

God bless you.