Alabama and the Nation’s Conscience
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In the first week of March, PCUN President Ramón Ramírez and I each participated in the re-enactment of the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. This year, the march took on a whole new meaning—and issue—as Latinos and immigrants’ rights activists joined in. During the civil rights era, events in Alabama raised both our hopes and fears about the state of America’s creed that this is a country “with liberty and justice for all.”

We traveled to Alabama because, last year, Alabama passed HB 56, the worst anti-immigrant law in the nation. HB 56 orders public schools to demand immigration papers from children when they enroll, it shuts off municipal water service to customers who lack legal immigration status, and it requires local and state police to demand proof of legal status (supposedly, without engaging in racial profiling).

HB 56’s most draconian provisions are on hold, temporarily enjoined by a federal court. On April 25th, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral argument on the propriety of injunctions issued against the law in Arizona (SB 1070) that inspired HB 56. The Alabama Legislature has before it bills to either repeal HB 56 or re-work its most decried provisions.

Our experiences in Alabama reminded us that the colonies—and the United States that they became—took 250 years and a civil war to eliminate government sanctioned slavery. Until 1868, Africans and African-Americans on U.S. soil were not considered citizens. It took another century-plus to establish that African-Americans are entitled to equal access to voting, to public services and to public spaces.

America—and Alabama—was a very different place in March, 1965. An all-white State Police force savagely beat 600 marchers as they nonviolently stood their ground on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, the first stage of their pilgrimage to the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery.

Forty-seven years later, national leaders, local and national elected officials crossed that Bridge, leading thousands of others, assisted by Alabama State troopers—many, African-Americans. U.S. Rep. John Lewis, who co-led the 1965 Bridge crossing, denounced HB 56 as an affront to civil rights and un-American. Other iconic leaders of that era stood at his side and added their voices.

HB 56 forces us to confront deep questions: What does it mean to be an American? Are we all people? Can everyone participate? Do we respect and value all people who contribute to our society and economy?

Oregon’s political leadership has, for the most part, rightly resisted consideration of anti-immigrant laws. We are more convinced than ever that those laws do nothing but damage to a community’s social fabric and its economic vitality. We returned from Alabama inspired by bonds we saw forged across race, ethnicity, and history to uphold human dignity and to turn back scapegoating and oppression.
The sea of humanity gathered at the State Capitol in Montgomery on March 9th demanding repeal of HB 56—an historic outpouring of African-Americans, Latinos, whites—raises our hopes that America will finally fulfill its creed.