



Our Vision: Catholic Social Teaching and Migration

Why does the church care about immigration policies? The Catholic Church has historically held a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scriptural and Catholic social teachings, as well as her own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of those who are marginalized and whose God-given rights are not respected.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to the undermining of immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of persons in this country in an unauthorized capacity, living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited with their loved ones. Our nation's border enforcement strategies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of migrants.

The Church has a responsibility to shine the message of God on this issue and help to build bridges between all parties so that an immigration system can be created that is just for all and serves the common good, including the legitimate security concerns of our nation.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

One need not look further than the life and words of Jesus Christ to understand that persons on the move—refugees, migrants, immigrants—are special in the eyes of God. The baby child Jesus was a refugee who, along with the Holy Family, fled the terror of Herod into Egypt. (Mt. 2:14-15)

In His public ministry, Jesus was an itinerant, moving from place to place, “with nowhere to lay His Head...” (Mt. 8:20)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs us to welcome the stranger: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35). As we welcome the stranger into our midst, we welcome Christ Himself, for in the face of the migrant, immigrant, and refugee, we must see the face of Christ. In the Gospel of Luke, this is made clear in

the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24: 13-15), as they become witnesses to the Truth by welcoming the stranger, who is Christ.

Today the illegal migrant comes before us like that 'stranger' in whom Jesus asks to be recognized. To welcome him and to show him solidarity is a duty of hospitality and fidelity to Christian identity itself."
-Pope John Paul II, Annual Message for World Migration Day, 1995.

If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not oppress him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself—for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.
-Leviticus 19: 32-34

Since its founding, the United States has received immigrants from around the world who have found opportunity and safe haven in a new land. The labor, values, and beliefs of immigrants from throughout the world have transformed the United States from a loose group of colonies into one of the leading democracies in the world today. From its founding to the present, the United States remains a nation of immigrants grounded in the firm belief that newcomers offer new energy, hope, and cultural diversity. Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving. -Strangers No Longer: A Pastoral Letter Issued by the U.S. and Mexico Bishops, 2003

A SUMMARY OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON MIGRANTS, IMMIGRANTS, AND REFUGEES (www.justiceforimmigrants.org)

1. PERSONS HAVE THE RIGHT TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES IN THEIR HOMELAND.

This principle states that a person has a right not to migrate. In other words, economic, social, and political conditions in their homeland should provide an opportunity for a person to work and support his or her family in dignity and safety. In public policy terms, efforts should be made to address global economic inequities through just trade practices, economic development, and debt relief. Peacemaking efforts should be advanced to end conflict which forces persons to flee their homes.

2. PERSONS HAVE THE RIGHT TO MIGRATE TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

When persons are unable to find work and support themselves and their families, they have a right to migrate to other countries and work. This right is not absolute, as stated by Pope John XXIII, when he said this right to emigrate applies when “there are just reasons for it.” In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty is rampant and political unrest has resulted in wars and persecution, migrants who are forced to leave their homes out of necessity and seek only to survive and support their families must be given special consideration.

3. SOVEREIGN NATIONS HAVE A RIGHT TO CONTROL THEIR BORDERS.

The Church recognizes the right of the sovereign to protect and control its borders in the service of the common good of its citizens. However, this is not an absolute right. Nations also have an obligation to the universal common good, as articulated by Pope John XXII in *Pacem in Terris*, and thus should seek to accommodate migration to the greatest extent possible. Powerful economic nations, such as the United States,

have a higher obligation to serve the universal common good, according to Catholic social teachings. In the current global economic environment, in which labor demands in the United States attract foreign laborers, the United States should establish an immigration system that provides legal avenues for persons to enter the nation legally in a safe, orderly, and dignified manner to obtain jobs and reunite with family members.

4. REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS SHOULD BE AFFORDED PROTECTION.

Persons who flee their home countries because they fear persecution should be afforded safe haven and protection in another country. Conflict and political unrest in many parts of the world force persons to leave their homes for fear of death or harm. The United States should employ a refugee and asylum system that protects asylum seekers, refugees, and other forced migrants and offers them a haven from persecution.

5. THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE HUMAN DIGNITY OF UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS SHOULD BE RESPECTED.

Persons who enter a nation without proper authorization or who over-stay their visas should be treated with respect and dignity. They should not be detained in deplorable conditions for lengthy periods of time, shackled by their feet and hands, or abused in any manner. They should be afforded due process of the law and, if applicable, allowed to articulate a fear of return to their home before a qualified adjudicator. They should not be blamed for the social ills of a nation.

For additional resources, updates on legislation, and opportunities to take action, consult the website at www.justiceforimmigrants.org or contact the Social Justice Office of the Diocese of Oakland at 510-267-8379.

*We recall Christ's teaching parable of the Good Samaritan which he offered in response to the question: **And who is my neighbor?** Jesus made the Samaritan—who was looked upon as an unholy outcast and foreigner—the model because he came to the aid of the injured man who was a stranger to him. Now is our chance to come to the aid of those among us who come from a foreign land. Now is our chance to care about the strangers whom Jesus called our neighbors! California Catholic Conference, March 2006*