



Immigration Reform and Catholic Social Teaching¹

The history of the Catholic Church in the US compels us to care in a unique way for the welfare of today's immigrants. Our immigrant ancestors helped build the Church here and helped establish a thriving American political system. The first American citizen to become a saint – Frances Xavier Cabrini – was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the universal patroness of immigrants. Catholic immigrants of every generation have experienced discrimination and intolerance at the hands of those who arrived before them. In the 1600s and 1700s some Catholics were denied the right to vote, hold office and celebrate mass in a church. “No Irish Need Apply” was a staple of employment ads in the 19th and 20th centuries. Descendants of enslaved Africans continue to suffer the after effects of slavery and segregation. Today, like their immigrant predecessors, Latinos, Asians, and others are the objects of suspicion, intolerance and discrimination.

The role of the Catholic Church in the current immigration debate in the United States has surprised and perhaps upset many people, including even some Catholics. But the Church's position on migration has remained consistent for decades.

Catholic Social Teaching

Drawing on some classic principles of Catholic social thought, the bishops of the Church have expressed opposition to the breaking of laws and unlawful entry into the country. The Church has long acknowledged the right of a nation-state to control its territorial borders and to regulate entry. The State has a very serious responsibility to protect its citizens and this may entail strong immigration controls. At the same time however, the Church says that human beings have a right to migrate—particularly in search of work in order to improve their human condition and to provide for the needs of their families. The bishops have called for just immigration laws that will allow generous channels of entry, good working conditions, families being able to stay together and the protection of the migrant's dignity and human rights.

Concern for family unity and the dignity of all God's children should underlie our moral thinking as Catholic Christians. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus blesses the poor and those who hunger and thirst for justice [Matt 5]. He makes clear through the story of the Good Samaritan that God's kingdom is one of love and community for all people including the stranger and the alien in our midst [Luke 10]. In the eyes of God, we are one human family whose salvation is found in care and concern for the least among us. [Matt 25:40] “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, the immigrant and the 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.

The Need for Immigration Reform

Our current immigration system is broke and needs comprehensive reform. As Catholics it is our responsibility to live out our Christian moral belief within society. This responsibility begins by educating ourselves on the issues surrounding current immigration law, why comprehensive reform is necessary and how our laws affect family unity and the dignity of our neighbors. It is important to understand that

¹ This document is compiled from the following Justice for Immigrants publications “Catholic Social Teaching on Migration”; “Understanding Catholic Social Teaching as it Relates to Migration”; “Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration – A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland November 2007”. Go to www.justiceforimmigrants.org

the Catholic position on immigration is based on Catholic social teaching, which is derived from the Gospels and the words of Christ; statements and encyclicals of the Popes; and statements and pastoral letters of bishops around the world, including the U.S. bishops. In January, 2003, the U.S. bishops issued the pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In that document, the U.S. bishops articulated the following five principles that govern how the Church responds to public policy proposals relating to immigration.

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.

US Conference of Catholic Bishops

