



JUSTICE FOR  
IMMIGRANTS

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CATHOLIC  
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TEACHING

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## Catholic Social Teaching and Migration

**BACKGROUND.** In advocating on behalf of migrants, immigrants, and refugees, it is important to understand that the Catholic position 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. Understanding these teachings, which support the U.S. bishops' public policy positions on immigration, is helpful in understanding and defending these positions, especially within Catholic audiences.

**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS.** 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). Jesus Himself was not welcomed by His own people: “He came to what was His own, but His own people did not accept him.” (Jn. 1:11).

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.

**PAPAL TEACHINGS.** In the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), Pope Leo XIII established that persons have a right to work to survive and to support his or her family.

Pope Pius XII, in the apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of the Migrant), reaffirms that migrants have a right to a life with dignity, and therefore a right to migrate toward that end: “Then, according to the teachings of *Rerum Novarum*, the right of the family to a life worthy of human dignity is recognized. When this happens, migration attains its natural scope...”



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In the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), Pope John XXIII clearly articulates the right to migrate and the right not to migrate: “Every human being has the right to the freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of their country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate and take up residence elsewhere.”

Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this basic teaching in an address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants in 1985: “Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.”

In his recent trip to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI has continued this positive message in relation to immigration and called on Americans “to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrow and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home. This, indeed, is what your fellow countrymen have done for generations. From the beginning, they have opened their doors to the tired, the poor, the ‘huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ These are the people whom America has made her own.” Furthermore, in his Angelus sermon on January 14, 2007, the Holy Father called on political leaders to assist “migrants and their families with the help of specific legislative, juridical and administrative protection.”

**STATEMENTS OF THE U.S. BISHOPS.** The U.S. bishops have taken the Gospel teachings and the teachings of the Popes and applied it to the immigration reality in the United States. 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



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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 XXIII 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.