

# *Welcoming Christ in the Migrant*



## **Catholic Social Teaching on Migration**



U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Migration and Refugee Services





# Welcoming Christ in the Migrant

*'Lord, when did we see you a stranger ... and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'*

(Mt. 25: 44-45)



*Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own...Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself.*

Pope Benedict XVI., *Deus Caritas Est* (14)

We live in an age when strangers in our midst have become a source of suspicion and fear. Jesus' command for us to welcome these strangers as we would welcome Him is at odds with much of the prevailing sentiment expressed today. Debates over whether and how to address the migration phenomenon fills not only the halls of government but even community and parish halls. The historically generous American spirit has been replaced in some quarters with calls for isolation and restriction.

In this fearful environment, how is a Christian to respond? Christ's call is unchanging: we are obliged to welcome the stranger with love, knowing that "perfect love casts out all fear". (1Jn 4:18) This purifying love for God and neighbor was the subject of the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est - God is Love*. In it we are reminded that through the perfect love of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, Jesus has conquered fear for all of his children. To be welcomed into this freedom ourselves we must be willing to welcome others.

## A Mandate of Love

The Bible tells us compelling stories of God's love for people on the move. Abraham and Sarah are called by God to migrate from the land of Ur to the promised land of Canaan. God tells them *"Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you...I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you"*. (Gn 12: 1, 3)

In Exodus, Moses leads the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and for forty years they lived as wanderers with no homeland of their own. The Israelites' own migrant experience gave rise to God's command to take special care of the alien: *"You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt"* (Lv 19:33-34).

The Gospels begin with Matthew's story of Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt because the power-hungry King Herod wanted to kill their newborn son, Jesus. Our Savior and His family lived as refugees because their own land was not safe.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is portrayed as a migrant: a teacher, and healer traveling through Judea and Samaria to share his message of love, welcome, and salvation for all people. He had no place of his own and relied on the hospitality of others for his and his disciples' needs. Jesus establishes the love and care we show for strangers as the standard by which we shall be judged: *"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).



## Catholic Social Teaching on Migration

Drawn from this rich scriptural tradition, Catholic theology has always promoted human rights rooted in natural law and God's revelation. In 1891, the encyclical *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor)* developed a systematic presentation of principles of the rights and responsibilities of people. *Rerum Novarum* commented on the situation of immigrants; in later documents, popes and bishops have synthesized the Catholic theological tradition to articulate three basic principles of migration:

1. People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.
2. A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control migration.
3. A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

Although the first two of these principles may seem to contradict each other, they are put in context by the third. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the absolute equality of all people and the commitment to the common good. People of faith must seek a way of balancing their valid security needs with meeting the basic human needs of others in the confidence of God's love of and care for all of His people. It is in achieving this balance that we can embrace each of the principles of Catholic social teaching on migration.

Br. Claude Lane, O.S.B.

When war, natural disaster, famine, or crushing poverty causes mass migration, the lands that receive these

displaced people may feel threatened, with the citizens of the host nation fearing that newcomers will take scarce jobs, land, and resources. While recognizing these fears, the Church is clear in teaching that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. As the Gospels make clear, it is God's will that the abundance of the earth be shared in love by all of His people.

Reflecting on this spiritual imperative, Pope Benedict observed in his 2006 World Refugee Day message, "... those who must leave everything, at times even their families, to escape from grave difficulties and dangers... [should find] the Church as a homeland where no one is a stranger."

At the same time, the second principle of migration acknowledges that a country has the right to regulate its borders and to control migration. Individuals have the right to move in search of a safe and humane life, but no country is bound to accept all those who wish to resettle there.

Ordinarily, people migrate because they are desperate and the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land. Migrants and refugees endure many hardships and most would prefer to return home under more favorable circumstances. As American Catholics, we should work to alleviate the conditions that force people to leave their own land and protect their rights while they reside among us.

The third principle calls upon nations to regulate their borders with justice and mercy, seeking the common good above self-interest. Family reunification must be at the center of all government migration policies, thereby allowing families to remain intact as much as possible and avoiding periods of prolonged separation.

The more than eleven million undocumented immigrants who currently reside within the United States are of special concern to the Church and society in general. Undocumented persons are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers, and they are not able to seek redress because of the fear of discovery and deportation. The Church has historically taught that the lack of proper legal status should never deprive persons of their God-given rights to be treated fairly and humanely in keeping with international laws. The presence of large numbers of people living in the shadows of society without recourse to fundamental legal protections is a grave injustice that the Church seeks to change.



## The Global Refugee Situation

War, persecution, famine, environmental disasters, and other factors continue to force people to flee their homes for a chance at survival. In 2005, over a million new refugees were added to those already in exile, bringing the total number of refugees to over 12 million. Of these, over 8 million of them have been warehoused in the desperate conditions of refugee camps for over five years.

Although developed countries such as the United States contribute much of the funding to assist refugees, the world's poorest countries host the vast majority of the world's refugees. Nations with per capita incomes of less than \$2,000 host more than two-thirds of all refugees. Nations with per capita incomes over \$10,000 hosted only four percent of the world's refugees. Poor nations, many times unable to provide basic services for even their own citizens, often end up maintaining refugees in deplorable conditions. Refugee camps are typically without adequate housing, electricity, access to clean water, medical care, and even food. Those who live within them have no rights and are not allowed to travel or seek work.

As has been the case in previous times of war, U.S. immigration policies following the 2001 terrorist attacks have undergone close and critical scrutiny, with growing public pressure to become more restrictive. In the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, for example, refugee admissions to the U.S. dropped from more than 70,000 per year to less than 30,000 per year in 2002 and 2003. Today, refugee admissions total about 50,000 per year, but the program is once again being jeopardized by anti-terrorism laws that prevent even bona fide refugees from entering the country.



## The Church's Call to Action

The United States was founded by refugees fleeing religious persecution and has been inhabited since then largely by immigrants. Yet today, the United States finds itself at a critical juncture regarding its openness to newcomers. In the midst of the national immigration debate many have adopted a siege mentality.

In their joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of the United States and Mexico called for a series of reforms to the broken U.S. immigration system. These include: (1) policies to address the situations that create refugees and migrants, such as war and global poverty, (2) reform of our immigration system, including an earned legalization program and a temporary worker program with appropriate worker protections, and (3) restoration of due process for immigrants.

In response, the Church in the United States launched a national campaign - *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope* - in May 2005 to change public attitudes toward immigrants, to create the political will for positive reforms in immigration laws and policies, and to enact laws consistent with the bishops' principles for immigration reform.

Parishes and individual Catholics are also called to proclaim the Church's message of hope and welcome, create a society that acknowledges the vital contributions of migrants, refugees, and other newcomers to the United States, and seek to gain basic rights and protections for those living and working outside society's mainstream. Among the actions that can be taken to achieve these objectives:



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## ❖ Encourage Conversion of Hearts

- ◆ Use scripture readings such as the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt as "teachable moments" in homilies.
- ◆ Insert quotes from pastoral letters on migration in your parish bulletin.
  - ◆ Distribute this pamphlet to your parish.
  - ◆ Include multi-cultural awareness activities in parish youth programs and activities.
  - ◆ Sponsor a parish migration education program

## ❖ Express Solidarity with Migrants

- ◆ Celebrate National Migration Week in your parish, traditionally observed the week following the Feast of the Epiphany in January.
  - ◆ Establish a "twinning" relationship with a parish that serves poor and immigrant communities.
  - ◆ Include prayers on behalf of migrants and refugees in the General Intercessions each week.

## ❖ Develop a "Parish Welcoming Plan"

- ◆ Distribute welcoming packets for newly arrived parishioners, host welcoming events such as international dinners, visit newcomers to the parish community, and organize outreach activities directed towards migrant populations in the community.

- ◆ Plan multicultural liturgies, sacramental services, and intercessions, outreach and training for members of all ethnic groups as parish ministers, provide multilingual resources and materials, and address the pastoral needs of migrant populations.

- ◆ Establish a relationship with the local diocesan refugee resettlement office and volunteer by organizing charitable drives to benefit migrants and refugees, hosting job fairs, offering English language tutoring, or planning a parish service day in migrant and refugee neighborhoods.

- ◆ Help keep parishioners informed on current public policy issues, coordinate letter-writing campaigns and visits with legislators, and assist in recruiting local attorneys to provide legal services and advice on immigration matters.

## ❖ Helpful Resources

Many resources are available online to assist parishes and individuals in responding to God's call to welcome the newcomers in our midst. These include:

- ◆ *USCCB/ Migration and Refugee Services.* Offers additional information on Catholic social teaching, current information on migration and refugee policy and advocacy issues, copies of the bishops statements on migration, and other resources. Visit [www.usccb.org/mrs](http://www.usccb.org/mrs)
- ◆ *National Migration Week.* Provides educational and spiritual materials on migration. Visit [www.usccb.org/mrs/nmw.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/nmw.shtml)
- ◆ *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope* Catholic campaign for immigration reform provides resources for parishes, policymakers, immigrants, and local organizers. Visit [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org)
- ◆ *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* U.S. bishops pastoral statement and accompanying parish kit of materials. Visit [www.usccb.org/mrs/welcome.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/welcome.shtml).



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