



CATHOLIC TEACHING ON IMMIGRATION: CLEARING UP COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Amidst a dire border crisis, immigration has arisen as a particularly divisive issue of major political implications. As the Mother and Teacher of all nations, the Catholic Church has always been at the forefront of efforts to welcome immigrants to the United States and promote their integration; but her position has frequently been misconstrued.

This publication seeks to address some questions regarding the Church's stance on immigration.

1. Does the Church advocate for "open borders" or encourage unlawful migration?

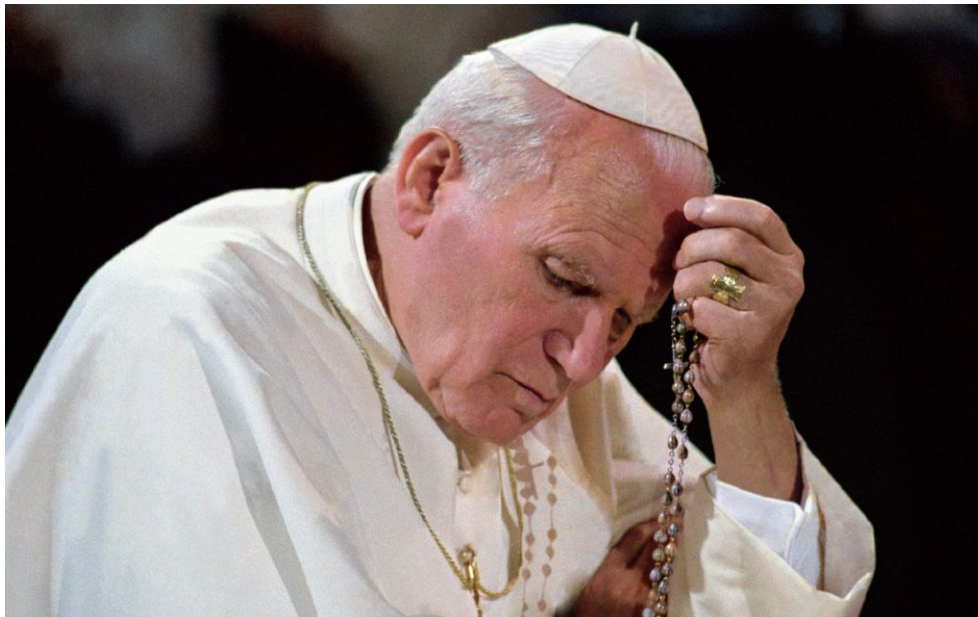
No. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption" (n. 2241). This includes a country's right to uphold its borders.

However, the Church does maintain that such a right is not unlimited; it must always be balanced with the duty to welcome newcomers with charity and respect for the human person. In their joint pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of Mexico and the U.S. listed five principles of migration derived from Catholic social teaching (n. 33). Those include that "nations have the right to control their borders" and that "persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and

their families", while granting that the latter presupposes the violation of a first "ideal" principle: "persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland."

2. What does the Church teach about illegal immigration and undocumented migrants?

Regarding immigrants themselves, the *Catechism* states: "Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that



“His irregular legal status cannot allow the migrant to lose his dignity, since he is endowed with inalienable rights, which can neither be violated nor ignored.” Pope St. John Paul II

origin the conditions needed for a dignified life” (*Fratelli tutti*, n. 129).

3. Why do Catholic organizations serve migrants along the border and elsewhere?

Catholics serve migrants and other newcomers in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, affirming the inalienable rights and the dignity of every person, and providing Christian charity as a visible sign of God’s mercy to those in need. In *Strangers No Longer*, the U.S. and Mexican bishops aligned themselves with the “religious and social service providers who, without violating civil law, attempt to respond to the migrant knocking at the door” (n. 4). They overtly called on pastors and lay leaders to ensure support for immigrant families, urging communities to offer migrants “hospitality, not hostility,” commending Church

communities that establish shelters that provide appropriate pastoral and social services to migrants, and urging local dioceses to sponsor pertinent social services for newcomers, particularly affordable legal services (n. 42).

In his Annual Message for World Migration Day 1996, Pope St. John Paul II stated: “The Church considers the problem of illegal migrants from the standpoint of Christ, who died to gather together the dispersed children of God, to rehabilitate the marginalized and to bring close those who are distant; in order to integrate all within a communion that is not based on ethnic, cultural, or social membership, but on common justice (...) The Church acts in continuity with Christ’s mission. In particular, she asks herself how to meet the needs, while respecting the law, of those persons who are not allowed to remain in a national territory. She also asks what the right to emigrate is worth without the corresponding right to immigrate. She tackles the problem of how to involve in this work of solidarity those Christian communities frequently infected by a public opinion that is often hostile to immigrants” (n. 3).

4. What services do Catholic organizations provide to migrants and refugees?

The types of services offered vary from one organization to another, but the Church regularly and consistently cooperates in the administration of humanitarian aid with federal, state, and local governments. For instance, Catholic groups along the U.S.-Mexico border may provide a meal, clean clothes, a shower, medical attention, and temporary shelter for newly arrived migrants.

receives them, to obey its laws, and to assist in carrying civic burdens” (n. 2241). The Church affirms the rule of law, encourages the use of lawful immigration pathways, and discourages migration simply for the purpose of advancing one’s individual position without regard for the common good in one’s country of origin.

Pope St. John Paul II addressed the issue of undocumented migrants in his Annual Message for World Migration Day 1996 in the following terms: “His irregular legal status cannot allow the migrant to lose

his dignity, since he is endowed with inalienable rights, which can neither be violated nor ignored. Illegal immigration should be prevented, but it is also essential to combat vigorously the criminal activities which exploit illegal immigrants. The most appropriate choice, which will yield consistent and long-lasting results, is that of international cooperation which aims to foster political stability and to eliminate underdevelopment” (n. 2). In the same vein, Pope Francis stated: “Ideally, unnecessary migration ought to be avoided; this entails creating in countries of



Above: Catholic Charities, throughout the United States, works with migrants to help them navigate the U.S. laws, learn English, and reunite with family.

"Ideally, unnecessary migration ought to be avoided; this entails creating in countries of origin the conditions needed for a dignified life." Pope Francis



Throughout the U.S., there are Catholic organizations that advise recently arrived migrants on the steps they can take to reunite with family, find lawful employment, enroll children in school, learn English, and navigate life in their new communities (including on how to meet their legal obligations and comply with applicable laws). Others provide services to noncitizens who have suffered tragic experiences, such as human trafficking. At the same time, Catholic priests and deacons administer the Sacraments to immigrants, regardless of their legal status.

5. Does the Church have some suggestions on how to solve the migratory crisis?

Yes. First of all, the Church does recognize that there is a major migratory crisis, both in the U.S. and globally. Pope Benedict XVI stated the following: "We are facing a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires

bold, forward-looking policies of international cooperation if it is to be handled effectively. Such policies should set out from close collaboration between the migrants' countries of origin and their countries of destination; it should be accompanied by adequate international norms able to coordinate different legislative systems (...) No country can be expected to address today's problems of migration by itself. We are all witnesses of the burden of the suffering, the dislocation and the aspirations that accompany the flow of migrants. The phenomenon, as everyone knows, is difficult to manage" (*Caritas in Veritate*, n. 62).

Clearly, the Church does not envision the chaotic, unchecked, and life-threatening situation we currently have, but rather an orderly process of immigration, subject to reasonable legal requirements. The Bishops of the U.S. oppose "enforcement only" policies and are in favor of a comprehensive immigration reform,

that addresses the root causes and aims to achieve a humane balance between the right to immigrate and the right of a country to uphold its borders (see next page.)

6. What resources can I look into to better understand the Catholic view on immigration?

[Catechism of the Catholic Church \(n. 2241\).](#)

[Pope St. John Paul II: Annual Message for World Migration Day 1996.](#)

[Pope Benedict XVI: Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate \(n. 62\).](#)

[Pope Francis: Declaration of the DDF on Human Dignity \(n. 40\).](#)

[USCCB: Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope.](#)

[USCCB: Catholic Ministries Serving Migrants and Refugees.](#)

[USCCB: Catholic Church's Position on Immigration Reform.](#)

[University of Notre Dame Alumni Association: Catholic Teaching on Immigration.](#)

[Catholic Answers \(Trent Horn\): Illegal Immigration and the Morality of Deportation.](#)

[National Catholic Register \(Jimmy Akin\): Immigration: What Does the Church Teach?](#)

FIVE PRINCIPLES WHICH GUIDE THE CHURCH'S VIEW ON MIGRATION ISSUES

I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.

II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

V. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.

Source: *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope.*

USCCB: Comprehensive Immigration Reform Needed

Afghan refugees wait to board a plane for asylum in the United States.



"'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Mt 25:35). It is the Church's task not only to present constantly the Lord's teaching of faith, but also to indicate its appropriate application to the various situations which the changing times continue to create. 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 St. John Paul II: Annual Message for World Migration Day 1996

In January 2003, the U.S. Catholic Bishops released a pastoral letter on immigration entitled *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In that document, they outlined the main elements of their proposal for comprehensive immigration reform.

These include:

Earned Legalization: An earned legalization program would allow foreign nationals of good moral character who are living in the United States to apply to adjust their status to obtain lawful permanent residence. Such a program would create an eventual

path to citizenship, requiring applicants to complete and pass background checks, pay a fine, and establish eligibility for resident status to participate in the program. Such a program would help stabilize the workforce, promote family unity, and bring a large population "out of the shadows," as members of their communities.

Future Worker Program: A worker program to permit foreign-born workers to enter the country safely and legally would help reduce illegal immigration and the loss of life in the American desert. Any program should include

workplace protections, living wage levels, safeguards against the displacement of U.S. workers, and family unity.

Family-based Immigration

Reform: It currently takes years for family members to be reunited through the family-based legal immigration system. This leads to family breakdown and, in some cases, illegal immigration. Changes in family-based immigration should be made to

increase the number of family visas available and reduce family reunification waiting times.

Restoration of Due Process

Rights: Due process rights taken away by the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) should be restored. For example, the three and ten year bars to reentry should be eliminated.

Addressing Root Causes:

Congress should examine the root causes of migration, such as under-development and poverty in sending countries, and seek long-term solutions. The antidote to the problem of illegal immigration is sustainable economic development in sending countries. In an ideal world, migration should be driven by choice, not necessity.

Enforcement: The U.S. Catholic Bishops accept the legitimate role of the U.S. government in intercepting unauthorized migrants who attempt to travel to the United States. The Bishops also believe that by increasing lawful means for migrants to enter, live, and work in the United States, law enforcement will be better able to focus upon those who truly threaten public safety: drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and would-be terrorists. Any enforcement measures must be targeted, proportional, and humane.

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