



A Guide to Understanding Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples

UTILIZING THIS RESOURCE IN THE PARISH

The U.S. bishops' pastoral statement *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* is firmly grounded in the Church's social teaching. Understanding and appreciating Catholic social teaching helps us to put our faith into action. Is your parish community looking for opportunities to better understand and practice what our faith teaches? Using this resource as a study guide, discussion starter, and guide to action can provide such opportunities.

For which parish groups is it intended?

- *Parish staff, particularly educators and catechists:* This resource will help to better educate them about Catholic social teaching as it pertains to the pastoral statement and will assist them in teaching others.
- *RCIA groups, young adult groups, and small faith communities:* This resource can be copied and distributed to these groups for use as a study and discussion guide and as a guide to action.

BIBLICAL VISION OF LOVE FOR STRANGERS

Both the Old and New Testaments tell compelling stories of refugees forced to flee because of oppression. Exodus tells the story of the Chosen People, Israel, who were victims of bitter slavery in Egypt. They were utterly helpless by themselves, but with

God's powerful intervention they were able to escape and take refuge in the desert. For forty years they lived as wanderers with no homeland of their own. Finally, God fulfilled his ancient promise and settled them on the land that they could finally call home.

The Israelites' experience of living as homeless aliens was so painful and frightening that God ordered his people for all time to have special care for 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 New Testament begins with Matthew's story of Joseph and Mary's escape to Egypt with their newborn son, Jesus, because the paranoid and jealous King Herod wanted to kill the infant. Our Savior himself lived as a refugee because his own land was not safe.



Jesus reiterates the Old Testament command to love and care for the stranger, a criterion 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).

The Apostle Paul asserts the absolute equality of all people before God: “There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). In Christ, the human race is one before God, equal in dignity and rights.

THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON IMMIGRATION

Although Catholic theology has always promoted human rights rooted in natural law and God’s revelation, it was the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*) in 1891 that 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’ conferences have synthesized the Catholic theological tradition to articulate three basic principles on immigration.

First Principle: People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.

At the end of World War II, with the fall of the Nazi empire and the subsequent creation of the Soviet “Iron Curtain,” Europe faced an unprecedented migration of millions of people seeking safety, food, and freedom. At that time, Pope Pius XII wrote *Exsul Familia* (*The Emigre Family*), placing the Church squarely on the side of those seeking a better life by fleeing their homes.

When there is a massive movement of people such as during a war, natural disaster, or famine, the lands that receive these displaced people may be threatened. The influx may make it impossible for the native population to live securely, as the land may not have enough resources to support both. Even in more orderly migrations, such as in the United States, citizens and residents of the land may fear that newcomers will take jobs, land, and resources, impoverishing the people already present.

Because of the belief that newcomers compete for scarce resources, immigrants and refugees are at times driven away, resented, or despised. Nevertheless, the first principle of Catholic social teaching regarding immigrants is that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. This is based on biblical and ancient Christian teaching that the goods of the earth belong to all people. While the right to private property is defended in Catholic social teaching, individuals do not have the right to use private property without regard for the common good.

Every person has an equal right to receive from the earth what is necessary for life—food, clothing, shelter. Moreover, every person has the right to education, medical care, religion, and the expression of one’s culture. In many places people live in fear, danger, or dehumanizing poverty. Clearly, it is not God’s will that some of his children live in luxury while others have nothing. In Luke’s Gospel, the rich man was condemned for living well while the poor man starved at his doorstep (Lk 16:19-31).

The native does not have superior rights over the immigrant. Before God all are equal; the earth was given by God to all. When a person cannot achieve a meaningful life in his or her own land, that person has the right to move.

Second Principle: A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration.

The overriding principle of all Catholic social teaching is that individuals must make economic, political, and social decisions not out of short-sighted self-interest, but with regard for the common good. That means that a moral person cannot consider only what is good for his or her own self and family, but must act with the good of all people as his or her guiding principle.

While individuals have the right to move in search of a safe and humane life, no country is bound to accept all those who wish to resettle there. By this principle the Church recognizes that most immigration is ultimately not something to celebrate. Ordinarily, people do not leave the security of their own land and culture just to seek adventure in a new place or merely

to enhance their standard of living. Instead, they migrate because they are desperate and the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land. Immigrants and refugees endure many hardships and often long for the homes they left behind. As Americans we should cherish and celebrate the contributions of immigrants and their cultures; however, we should work to make it unnecessary for people to leave their own land.

Because there seems to be no end to poverty, war, and misery in the world, developed nations will continue to experience pressure from many peoples who desire to resettle in their lands. Catholic social teaching is realistic: While people have the right to move, no country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its social and economic life are jeopardized.

For this reason, Catholics should not view the work of the federal government and its immigration control as negative or evil. Those who work to enforce our nation's immigration laws often do so out of a sense of loyalty to the common good and compassion for poor people seeking a better life. In an ideal world, there would be no need for immigration control. The Church recognizes that this ideal world has not yet been achieved.

Third Principle: A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

The second principle of Catholic social teaching may seem to negate the first principle. However, principles one and two must be understood in the context of principle three. And all Catholic social teaching must be understood in light of the absolute equality of all people and the commitment to the common good.

A country's regulation of borders and control of immigration must be governed by concern for all people and by mercy and justice. A nation may not simply decide that it wants to provide for its own people and no others. A sincere commitment to the needs of all must prevail.

In our modern world where communication and travel are much easier, the burden of emergencies cannot be placed solely on nations immediately adjacent to the crises. Justice dictates that the world

community contribute resources toward shelter, food, medical services, and basic welfare.

Even in the case of less urgent migrations, a developed nation's right to limit immigration must be based on justice, mercy, and the common good, not on self-interest. Moreover, immigration policy ought to take into account other important values such as the right of families to live together. A merciful immigration policy will not force married couples or children to live separated from their families for long periods.

Undocumented immigrants present a special concern. Often their presence is considered criminal since they arrive without legal permission. Under the harshest view, undocumented people may be regarded as undeserving of rights or services. This is not the view of Catholic social teaching. The Catholic Church teaches that every person has basic human rights and is entitled to have basic human needs met—food, shelter, clothing, education, and health care. Undocumented persons are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers, and they are not able to complain because of the fear of discovery and deportation. Current immigration policy that criminalizes the mere attempt to immigrate and imprisons immigrants who have committed no crime or who have already served a just sentence for a crime is immoral. In the Bible, God promises that our judgment will be based on our treatment of the most vulnerable. Before God we cannot excuse inhumane treatment of certain persons by claiming that their lack of legal status deprives them of rights given by the Creator.

Finally, immigration policy that allows people to live here and contribute to society for years but refuses to offer them the opportunity to achieve legal status does not serve the common good. The presence of millions of people living without easy access to basic human rights and necessities is a great injustice.

It is the position of the Catholic Church that pastoral, educational, medical, and social services provided by the Church are never conditioned on legal status. All persons are invited to participate in our parishes, attend our schools, and receive other services offered by our institutions and programs.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR PARISHES

Suggested activities for recognizing that the United States is a nation of immigrants

- Have participants tell the stories of their own families' immigration to the United States. Compare the stories of those who have recently immigrated with those who immigrated many years ago to demonstrate that the reasons for immigration have not changed.
- Ask participants to reflect on the changing ethnic composition of the parish and the neighborhood over its history.
- Ask participants to offer examples of how immigration and cultural diversity have changed the United States. Have them evaluate these changes.

What does the Church mean by the "right to migrate"?

- Do you agree that every person has the right to migrate to find the means to sustain life? Are there limitations on this right?
- Do you think that people have any duty to stay in their own land and to try to improve it?
- Do you believe that certain immigrants have a superior right to migrate? For example, consider a refugee fleeing a war, a poor family seeking a better life, and a computer engineer seeking a better job. Whom does U.S. immigration policy favor? What should our policy be?

What is the right of the nation to regulate immigration and to control its borders?

- Do you think that U.S. immigration policy is merciful and just? Why or why not?
- What are your feelings towards those who enforce our nation's immigration laws?
- If you believe that immigration policy needs modification, what changes would you suggest?

What should our attitude toward undocumented immigrants be?

- How should the United States regard and treat undocumented immigrants?
- How can we protect the rights of such people when they are treated unfairly by their employers?
- What government services should be provided to undocumented persons?
- What should be the Church's message to undocumented persons be. How should they be treated in the local parish?

Consider the following situations and offer ideas about how you and your parish can respond. For each item offer ideas about how to shape attitudes and to advocate for human rights.

- Immigration policy that favors highly skilled professionals over family reunification and movement of poor people seeking a better life
- The reluctance of neighborhoods, parishes, and individuals to accept different cultures, languages, and customs
- The imprisonment of undocumented immigrants while they seek to have their legal rights resolved
- Undocumented immigrants seeking to enroll their children in Catholic schools
- Undocumented immigrants seeking to enroll their children in public schools
- Refugee crises in Africa or the former Yugoslavia

Other suggested activities

- Attend Mass with an immigrant community and reflect on the experience.
- Learn a few words of the native languages of immigrants who worship in your parish.
- Visit immigrants held in prison while waiting for their cases to be resolved.
- Ask to meet with representatives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to learn about their work and suggest ways they can better enforce the nation's laws while respecting the rights and needs of immigrants.
- Identify immigrants in the parish still waiting for family members to be permitted to enter the United States. Learn about the process of sponsoring family members, and write to those still waiting overseas to promise friendship and welcome when they finally arrive.
- Meet with local hospital and public health personnel to ask about how undocumented persons are able to receive medical care.
- Meet with public school officials to ask how undocumented immigrant children are able to attend school.
- Consult the section "Developing a Welcoming Plan for the Parish" in the insert *How Do We Welcome the "Stranger" in Our Parishes* for many more ideas.

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