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Welcoming the Stranger
The Human Rights of Migrants

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A central principle of Catholic social teaching is the right to emigrate. Although there is little written on the right to immigrate – that is, enter a country – clearly the right to leave a person’s country without undue restraint implies that there be places that allow and provide good people meaningful opportunities to pursue their legitimate well-being and that of their families. In their several messages for World Migration Day and the Vatican’s addresses to the United Nations, the Popes have urged such openness to those who legitimately seek relief.

Specifically the Church bases the right to migrate on three other very important human rights: the right of a family to sustenance, the priority of the family over the state, and the right of economic initiative. These three rights have their origin in the principle of the universal common good, which is defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #164, cf. also Catholic Social Teaching on the Economics of Immigration, and similar articles by Andrew M. Yuengert)

As we mark the Church’s observance of Migration Week, it is important to pray and work for just federal initiatives that will accomplish worthy ends for both immigrants and the sovereignty of nations. A sound national immigration policy will help to minimize reactionary state and local solutions that sometimes grow out of political posturing and simple prejudice, and that in turn facilitate exploitation of foreign nationals.

Pope Pius XII taught that a sovereign state has a vital right to control its borders, but it is not absolute. The needs of the immigrant should be measured against the needs of receiving countries. We, as a more powerful nation, have an obligation to promote the universal good, accommodating migration flow in accord with just human principles, while not recklessly eroding the rule of law.

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
- Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- True refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The inalienable human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should always be respected the same as those of every human person.

Pope John Paul II pointed to the elimination of global underdevelopment as the antidote to illegal immigration. Particularly meaningful – and helpful to a global economy - would be certain long-term efforts that adjust economic inequalities between nations in such a way as to better provide workers with employment opportunities that allow them to remain at home and support themselves and their families. The creation of employment opportunities in these nations would help reduce poverty and mitigate the incentive for many migrants to look for employment in the United States.

The increasingly widespread adoption of free markets is beginning to address such global imbalances. As countries open themselves up to the world trading system, there is evidence that they will begin to catch up to the developed world. (cf. Economic Reform and the Process of Global Integration. Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner) Implementing economic policies that create living-wage jobs is vital, especially for foreign citizens without advanced skills.

The Church proposes several solutions, including creating a “path to citizenship” that offer some opportunities for the large number of undocumented workers to remain as legal workers, or eventually to earn citizenship. This would provide some benefit to labor markets in the United States, preserve family unity, and improve the standard of living in immigrant communities. There is appreciable evidence that migrant workers have and will continue to contribute to the U.S. economy. (cf. The Economic Benefits of Immigration, and other similar articles by George J. Borjas)

What might be some other elements of a just immigration policy? A new temporary worker program should enforce worker protections with wage levels and employment benefits that are sufficient to support a family. Serious consideration ought to be given to provisions that would include worker protections and job portability, protecting their basic rights and giving them the option to become lawful permanent residents after a specific amount of time.

A new policy will have to treat issues of border enforcement that do not intensify human trafficking and migrant deaths rather than reduce illegal crossings. There is no demonstrable evidence to suggest that the large influx of immigrants from Mexico and the Americas has compromised homeland security. The right to life and family, and even economic benefits to the Universal Common Good, must be considered alongside deliberations about appropriate border integrity.

Our nation continues to believe newcomers to be a source of energy, hope, and cultural diversity. More than that, however, we have a common faith in Jesus Christ that transcends borders, discrimination, and violence, resulting in a spirit of solidarity. We must respond in just and creative ways so that we may strengthen the faith, hope, and charity of migrants and all the People of God. May we entrust immigration reform to the prayers of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, an immigrant to America herself, the patron saint of immigrants, and the first American citizen to be canonized. In her own time, she experienced racism, discrimination, and prejudice in seeking better conditions for immigrants. May her example and prayers lead us to enact just and humane laws for all God's people.

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