

**CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON IMMIGRATION AND THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLES**

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**Abstract**

*This paper interrogates the Catholic social teaching on immigration and the movements of peoples. The discourse does this, by first of all stating that, the rights of migrants (refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and internally displaced persons-IDPs) begin with the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the dignity and sanctity of the human person. The paper submits that right to life and the conditions worthy of life, when threatened by poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflict, and other root causes, give rise to the right to migrate. It argues that unity in diversity is firmly grounded in the Church's social teaching and understanding and appreciating this helps us to put our faith into action. This paper, further evaluates the principles of Catholic social teaching using specific quotes from Church documents that address the most common misperceptions about Church teachings. The purpose of this discussion therefore, is to provide a brief, concise, and useful compilation of information on authentic Roman Catholic teaching regarding the areas of immigration and the movements of peoples that currently concern most Christians. The body of this work consists of quotes from documents and statements originating only from those men who are authorized to speak for the Catholic Church, namely, the Popes and those Bishops and theologians in union with them. Thus, following this methodology, these quotes are*

*extracted from encyclicals, pastoral letters, and addresses by these representatives of the Magisterium (teaching authority) of the Catholic Church.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Catholic Social Teaching, Magisterium, Church Documents

## **Introduction**

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. The rights of migrants (refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and internally displaced persons-IDPs) begin with the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the dignity and sanctity of the human person. The right to life and the conditions worthy of life, when threatened by poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflict, and other root causes, give rise to the right to migrate.<sup>1</sup> As Pope John XXIII explained:

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that one is a citizen of a particular state does not detract in any way from his membership in the human family as a whole, nor from his citizenship in the world community.<sup>2</sup>

This is a right to both emigrate from one's own country and immigrate into another country. In 2003 for example, the Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico named five principles<sup>3</sup> that have emerged from the "rich tradition of church teachings with regard to migration":

### **First Principle: Persons have a right to find opportunities in their own homeland**

This principle reflects the responsibilities of all citizens and governments for the common good, creating the political, economic, and social conditions for persons to live in dignity, raise their families, use their God-given gifts, and find employment that provides a living family wage - a fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) dating back to the 19th century. Wealthy and

powerful nations are obliged to assist less developed nations in creating the conditions for people to live dignified lives.

**Second Principle: Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families**

Pope Pius XII declared in 1952 that both natural law and devotion to humanity required that international migration be opened to people forced from their countries by revolutions, unemployment, or hunger. He explained: "For the Creator of the universe made all good things primarily for the good of all."<sup>4</sup> When people cannot find adequate work, they have a natural right to work elsewhere to attain the means of survival for themselves and their families.

**Third Principle: Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders**

Our tradition recognizes the right of nations to control their territories, a right arising from their responsibility for the common good. However, as Pope Pius indicated, this right is not absolute. State sovereignty "cannot be exaggerated to the point that access to this land is, for inadequate or unjustified reasons, denied to needy and decent people from other nations..." Balancing rights then becomes critical. In fact, according to the bishops, individual rights and state responsibility for the common good are complementary.

While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible.<sup>5</sup>

In 2000, the bishops, reflecting on the tension between border control and the individual right to fundamental dignity, declared the latter to "give rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life."<sup>6</sup>

**Fourth Principle: Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection**

Those who flee wars and persecution have a greater claim for protection from the global community. As the fathers of the church would urge: "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.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Fifth Principle: The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected**

According to the bishops, it is noteworthy that: “Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent dignity that should be respected.”<sup>8</sup> This applies to punitive laws, enforcement practices, detention conditions, abuse and neglect, and policies that tear families apart. Even undocumented workers, often subject to inadequate wages and demeaning conditions in a shadow economy, are entitled to basic human rights in terms of wages and working conditions. Immigrant workers, even ones without documents, do not lose their status as human persons made in God’s image. Demeaning wages, inhuman conditions, and the denial of workers’ natural rights assault the dignity and sanctity of the human person.

### **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. In addition to the five principles articulated by the Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico in 2003 as mentioned above, three other basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration is given due attention here. 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.<sup>9</sup> *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.<sup>10</sup> 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 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 shortsighted 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 human beings, 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.<sup>12</sup> The Catholic social teaching is realistic, thus, while people have the right to move, no country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its social and economic life is 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 absolute equality of all people and the commitment to common good.<sup>13</sup>

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 contributes 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

## **Conclusion**

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 their parishes, attend our schools, and receive other services offered by their institutions and programs.

In the course of this discourse thus far, this paper has successfully interrogated, examined and evaluated the principles of Catholic social teaching on migration and movements of peoples. Using specific quotes from Church documents that address the most common misperceptions about Church teachings in areas immigration, it was noted that the excerpts quoted in this work focus on the dignity of human person. As such, they are most suited for use to educate those who are ignorant of the Church's social teachings on the movements of people as a whole. In order to comprehend the beauty, richness, and wisdom of the quoted Church documents, we conclude by saying: it is necessary for the reader to take the time to sit down, read them, and contemplate their messages.

### **Endnotes**

1. Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, joint pastoral letter concerning migration, January 2003, Nos. 28-29.
2. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, No. 25.
3. *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., Nos. 33-39.
4. Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia*, Apostolic Constitution, Vatican City, 1952.
5. *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., No. 39.
6. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, Washington, D.C., 2000, p. 11.
7. *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., No. 37.
8. *Ibid.*, No. 38.
9. This resource was written by Fr. Thomas Betz, OFC, Director of Immigration and Refugee Services for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and is used with permission. Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the New American Bible, copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. 20017, and are used by permission of copyright owner. All rights reserved.
10. Pope Pius XI, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, XLIII, 1951, p. 843.
11. Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* No. 193, May 15, 1961.
12. Fr. Thomas Betz, OFC, op. cit.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Pope John Paul II in his Address on *Responsible Procreation*, September 17, 1983. " *The Wanderer*, September 29, 1983, pp. 1-3.