



Understanding Catholic Social Teaching as it Relates to Migration

FIVE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING RELATING TO MIGRATION

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 migrants; in later documents, popes and bishops' conferences have synthesized the Catholic theological tradition to articulate five basic principles on migration.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

...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"

Matthew 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"

Galatians 3:28

In Christ, the human race is one before God, equal in dignity and rights"

Basic Principles



JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS *a journey of hope*

4. 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.

5. 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.

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 unscrupulous employers, and they sometimes do not complain for 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, often 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.

DISCUSSION TOPICS, QUESTIONS, AND ACTIVITIES FOR PARISHES

- † Discuss our nation's history of immigration.
- † 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, nor have the conditions of welcome.
- † 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.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- † 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?
- † 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?
- † How should they be treated in the local parish?

Consider the following situations and offer ideas about how you and your parish might shape Gospel attitudes and advocate needed changes.

- † The reluctance of some, including Catholics, to accept people from different cultures, languages, and customs.
- † Undocumented immigrant children seeking to enroll in schools.
- † Calls by some to severely restrict and limit immigration to the United States.
- † The dichotomy between the limited availability of visas to come into the U.S. to work and the number of jobs dependent upon the labor of immigrants.
- † The inclination by some to perceive undocumented immigrants as law breakers and criminals.
- † U.S. border enforcement tactics that result in loss of lives of desperate, would-be migrants.