

The Catholic Church's Position on Immigration Reform

Immigration has been an emotionally charged topic as it has moved to prominence in public discussions. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has an office of Migration and Refugee Services/Office of Migration Policy and Public Affairs. In 2013, this office released a publication on Comprehensive Immigration Reform. Details of the article are included below. The full article can be found at

<https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/churchteachingonimmigrationreform>

The article begins by noting that there are many unauthorized persons residing in the United States. With that as context, the article continues:

“In large part, these immigrants feel compelled to enter by either the explicit or implicit promise of employment in the U.S. agriculture, construction, and service industries, among others. Most of this unauthorized flow comes from Mexico, a nation struggling with severe poverty, where it is often impossible for many to earn a living wage and meet the basic needs of their families.”

“Survival has thus become the primary impetus for unauthorized immigration flows into the United States.” Most illegal immigrants come to America for better employment opportunities, a greater degree of freedom, avoidance of political oppression, freedom from violence, family reunification, famine, climate crises, among other reasons. The article goes on to note that while there are several avenues for legal entry, these opportunities “are woefully insufficient to provide legal means for the foreign-born to enter the United States to live and work, and thereby meet our demand for foreign-born labor.”

The Bishops continue with a reminder of teachings from the Catechism on the duties of government regarding immigration:

“The Catholic Catechism instructs the faithful that good government has two duties, both of which must be carried out and neither of which can be ignored. The first duty is to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the human person. Persons have the right to immigrate and thus government must accommodate this right to the greatest extent possible, especially financially blessed nations: ‘The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him.’ Catholic Catechism, 2241”

“The second duty is to secure one’s border and enforce the law for the sake of the common good. Sovereign nations have the right to enforce their laws and all persons must respect the legitimate exercise of this right: “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. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens.” Catholic Catechism, 2241.”

Note that while governments may enact policies which define obligations “with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption”, a key point is that “the *first* duty is to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the human person.”

In a letter from January 2003, the Bishops stressed that, “[w]hen 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.” The Bishops made clear that the “[m]ore powerful economic nations...have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.”

The article noted that the “United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) opposes ‘enforcement only’ immigration policies and supports comprehensive immigration reform.” The elements of their proposal for comprehensive immigration reform include:

- Earned Legalization
- Future Worker Program
- Family-based Immigration Reform
- Restoration of Due Process Rights
- Addressing Root Causes
- 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.”

As Catholic Christians, let us keep these words from the U.S. Bishops in mind as we contemplate and engage in discussions on immigration.

John Hunt, Racial Equity Ministry