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Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration

A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland
November 2007

Increasingly, immigration is moving to the center of the public debate, not only in the halls of Congress and in Annapolis and other state capitals, but also in our neighborhoods, schools, churches and homes. Too often, discussions are marked by tension and confusion; at least as often, they are accompanied by a sincere longing to understand...and to be understood. Questions of legality, economics and the mix of cultures often dominate the immigration debate. As Catholics, we must move past divisions and remain focused on the dignity of the human person and the welfare of families.

We therefore urge Maryland Catholics to consider prayerfully the question of immigration, including illegal immigration. The rule of law must be respected. The discussion, however, cannot end there. Undocumented immigrants are persons with dignity – a reality that obliges us to learn about the immigration system, understand the motives for migration, and consider the needs of individuals and families. Our American ideals call us to participate in the public debate; our Catholic faith urges us to do so with charity.

All people have the right to have their basic needs met in their homelands. When the means to fulfill those needs do not exist at home, people have the right to seek them abroad.¹ At the same time, sovereign nations have the right to control their borders, provided the regulations promote the common good of our universal human family. Not surprisingly, these two rights may conflict. When they do, receiving nations with the ability to accommodate migrants are urged to respond with generosity so individuals have the opportunity to meet their basic needs and so families remain united.

This teaching flows not only from our profound respect for the human person and families, but also from Sacred Scripture. Strangers and sojourners, as St. Paul calls them, appear on the biblical scene in Genesis and remain prominent throughout the Old Testament. They are regularly referenced along with widows and orphans as vulnerable persons who must be treated with justice and compassion.

In the New Testament, we encounter our faith's most precious migrants – the Holy Family. St. Matthew's Gospel recounts the flight of St. Joseph, the Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus into Egypt to escape the wrath of a jealous king: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph ... are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil."²

In the Church, a universal body united through Christ, all find a home. Illegal entry is not condoned, but undocumented immigrants are embraced. "In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters."³

The history of the Church in the United States compels us to care in a unique way for the welfare of today's immigrants. Our immigrant ancestors helped build the Church here and helped establish a thriving American political system. The first American citizen to become a saint – Frances Xavier Cabrini – was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the universal patroness of immigrants. Catholic immigrants of every generation have experienced discrimination and intolerance at the hands of those who arrived before them. In the 1600s and 1700s, Maryland Catholics were denied the right to vote, hold public office and celebrate Mass in a church. “No Irish Need Apply” was a staple of employment ads in the 19th and 20th centuries. Descendants of enslaved Africans continue to suffer the bitter fruits of slavery and segregation. Today, like their immigrant predecessors, Latinos often are the objects of suspicion, intolerance and discrimination.

Maryland Catholics should welcome discussion of immigration and the challenges it can present. We must also recognize distinctions in the debate: The legality of a person's entry into the United States is one issue; our response to him now that he's here is a separate one. The former is the government's responsibility; the latter is also ours. When we exercise that responsibility, we should keep in mind the command of the Lord in the Old Testament: “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.”⁴

The Catholic Church reaches out to migrants in many ways. Catholic dioceses and parishes throughout the world strive to meet not only the spiritual needs, but also the basic human needs, of all people. Catholic Relief Services, headquartered in Baltimore, assists 80 million people worldwide, including many who have been displaced by war, genocide and the threat of starvation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops works for a just federal immigration policy and promotes economic initiatives that help people stay in their homelands. In Maryland, immigrants are served through the good work of organizations like the Hispanic Apostolate in Baltimore, the Spanish Catholic Center in Langley Park, and the Seton Center in Princess Anne.

The Church's work at all these levels is essential, but so too are the work and words of individual Catholics. Marylanders of good will must come together to honestly, respectfully, and prayerfully discuss their concerns about immigration. These discussions may not produce a change in national policy or impact the numbers or legal status of immigrants in our communities, but they will help us find local solutions to local challenges. Most importantly, they will help neighbors – citizens and documented and undocumented immigrants alike – see Christ in each other.

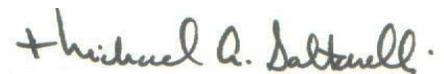
To facilitate these vital conversations, we commend to you four simple informational pieces produced by the Maryland Catholic Conference. These documents – focusing on the process, history, economics and root causes of immigration – are intended to foster thoughtful discussion and have been made available to all parishes. These resources and others may be found at www.mdccathcon.org. We hope you take advantage of them and pray that this season may produce a harvest of goodwill and fraternal charity among all who call or seek to call the United States home.



Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien
Archbishop of Baltimore



Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl
Archbishop of Washington



Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli
Bishop of Wilmington

¹ *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, 2003.

² *Exsul Familia*, Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, 1952.

³ *Undocumented Migrants*, Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996

⁴ Leviticus 19:34