

A stylized, colorful illustration. At the top, a large yellow sun is set against a red sky. Below the sun, a city with various colored buildings is visible. In the foreground, three figures are walking away from the viewer. The figure on the left is wearing a yellow tunic and blue pants, holding a wooden staff. The middle figure is wearing a white tunic and purple pants, with a red sash. The figure on the right is wearing a yellow tunic and purple pants, with a white head covering. The background is a mix of red, black, and purple shapes.

**Welcoming**

**Christ**

**in the**

**Migrant**

# **Welcoming Christ in the Migrant**

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**W**e live in an age when strangers in our midst have become a source of suspicion and fear. Jesus' command for us to welcome these strangers as we would welcome him is at odds with much of the prevailing sentiment expressed today. Debates over whether and how to address the migration phenomenon fill not only the halls of government but even community and parish halls. The historically generous American spirit has been replaced in some quarters with calls for isolation and restriction.

In this fearful environment, how is a Christian to respond? Christ's call is unchanging: we are obliged to welcome the stranger, knowing that "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). A disposition of openness and welcoming to the stranger signifies the same to Christ himself. Pope Benedict XVI highlights the importance of this dynamic in his first encyclical, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*. In it he stressed that "love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God" (no. 15).

## **MIGRATION IN SCRIPTURE**

**T**hroughout the Bible, the theme of migration repeatedly emerges and often signifies a turning point in the life of God's people. Abraham and Sarah are called by God to migrate from the land of Ur to the promised land of Canaan. God tells them, "Go forth from the land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. / I will make of you a great nation, / and I will bless you; / I will make your name great, / so that you will be a blessing" (Gn 12:1-2).

In Exodus, Moses leads the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and for forty years they live as wanderers with no homeland of their own. The Israelites' own migrant experience gave rise to God's command to take special care of the alien: "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lv 19:34).

The Gospels begin with Matthew's story of Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt because the power-hungry King Herod wanted to kill their newborn son, Jesus. Our Savior and his family lived as refugees because their own land was not safe. Reflecting on the flight of the Holy Family, Pope Pius XII proclaimed that they represent an archetype for all refugee families living in the world today.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is portrayed as a migrant: a teacher and healer traveling through Judea and Samaria to share his message of love, welcome, and salvation for all people. He had no place of his own and relied on the hospitality of others for his and his disciples' needs. Jesus establishes the love and care we show for strangers as the standard 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).

## **CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON MIGRATION**

**D**rawn from this rich scriptural tradition, Catholic theology has always promoted an ethic that is rooted in natural law and God's Revelation. As Catholic social teaching on migration developed, three fundamental

principles came to inform Church teaching on this issue:

- 1) People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.
- 2) A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control migration.
- 3) A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

Although the first two of these principles may seem to contradict each other, they are put into context by the third. People of faith must seek a way of balancing their valid security needs while at the same time striving to meet the basic human needs of others, including those who are foreign born. It is in achieving this balance that we can embrace each of the principles of Catholic social teaching on migration.

When war, natural disaster, famine, or crushing poverty causes mass migration, the lands that receive these displaced people may feel threatened, with the citizens of the host nation fearing that newcomers will take scarce jobs, land, and resources. While recognizing these fears, the Church teaches that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. As the Gospels make clear, it is God's will that the abundance of the earth be shared in love by all his people. Reflecting on this spiritual imperative, Pope Benedict XVI observed that "those who have to leave everything, sometimes even their family, to escape from grave problems and dangers . . . [should find] the Church as a homeland where no one is a stranger" (*Angelus*, June 19, 2005).

At the same time, the second principle of migration acknowledges that a country has the right to regulate its borders and to control migration. Individuals have the right to move in

search of a safe and humane life, but no country is bound to accept all those who wish to resettle there. Ordinarily, people migrate because they are desperate, and the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land. Migrants and refugees endure many hardships, and most would prefer to return home under more favorable circumstances. As American Catholics, we should work to alleviate the conditions that force people to leave their homeland while protecting their rights when they reside among us.

The third principle calls upon nations to regulate their borders with justice and mercy, seeking the common good above self-interest. Family reunification must be at the center of all government migration policies, thereby allowing families to remain intact as much as possible and avoiding periods of prolonged separation.

## THE GLOBAL REFUGEE SITUATION

War, persecution, famine, environmental disasters, and other factors continue to force people to flee their homes for a chance at survival. In 2011, the total number of refugees worldwide is estimated to be over twelve million (with an additional thirty-four million internally displaced persons). Over half have been warehoused in the desperate conditions of refugee camps for over five years.

Although developed countries such as the United States contribute much of the funding to assist refugees, the world's poorest countries host the vast majority of the world's refugees. Nations with per capita incomes of less than \$2,000 host more than two-thirds of all refugees. Nations with per capita incomes over

\$10,000 host only four percent of the world's refugees. Poor nations, many of them unable to provide basic services for even their own citizens, often end up maintaining refugees in deplorable conditions.

Refugee camps are typically without adequate housing, electricity, access to clean water, medical care, and even food. Those who live in them have no rights and are not allowed to travel or seek work. As has been the case in previous times of war, U.S. immigration policies following the 2001 terrorist attacks have undergone close and critical scrutiny, with growing public pressure that they become more restrictive. In the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, refugee admissions to the U.S. dropped from more than 70,000 per year to less than 30,000 per year in 2002 and 2003. In recent years the numbers of refugees admitted has surpassed 70,000, but the program is once again being jeopardized by concerns over both national security and the threat of budget cuts.

## THE CHURCH'S CALL TO ACTION

The United States was founded by people fleeing religious persecution and has been inhabited since then largely by immigrants. Yet today, the United States finds itself at a critical juncture regarding its openness to newcomers. In the midst of the national immigration debate, many have adopted a siege mentality.

The nearly eleven million undocumented immigrants who currently reside within the United States are of special concern to the Church and society in general. Undocumented persons are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers, as they are unable to seek

redress due of the fear of discovery and deportation. The Church has historically taught that the lack of proper legal status should never deprive persons of their God-given rights to be treated fairly and humanely. The presence of large numbers of people living in the shadows of society without recourse to fundamental legal protections is a grave injustice that the Church seeks to change.

In their joint pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of the United States and Mexico called for a series of reforms to the broken U.S. immigration system. These include (1) policies to address the root causes of migration, which include war and global poverty, (2) reform of our immigration system, including an earned legalization program and a temporary worker program with appropriate worker protections, and (3) restoration of due process for immigrants.

In response, the Church in the United States launched a national campaign—*Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope*—in May 2005 to change public attitudes toward immigrants, create the political will for positive reforms in immigration laws and policies, and enact laws consistent with the bishops' principles for immigration reform.

Parishes and individual Catholics are also called to proclaim the Church's message of hope and welcome; to create a society that acknowledges the vital contributions of migrants, refugees, and other newcomers to the United States; and to seek to gain basic rights and protections for those living and working outside society's mainstream. Specific actions can be taken to achieve these objectives:



## Encourage Conversion of Hearts

- Use Scripture readings such as the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt as “teachable moments” in homilies.
- Insert quotes from pastoral letters on migration in your parish bulletin.
- Distribute this pamphlet to your parishioners.
- Include multicultural awareness activities in parish youth programs and activities.
- Sponsor a parish migration education program.



## Express Solidarity with Migrants

- Celebrate National Migration Week in your parish, traditionally observed the week following the Feast of the Epiphany in January.
- Establish a “twinning” relationship with a parish that serves poor and immigrant communities.
- Include prayers on behalf of migrants and refugees in the General Intercessions each week.



## Develop a “Parish Welcoming Plan”

- Distribute welcoming packets for newly arrived parishioners, host welcoming events such as international dinners, visit newcomers to the parish community, and organize outreach activities directed toward migrant populations in the community.
- Plan multicultural liturgies, sacramental services, intercessions, outreach, and parish

ministry training for members of all ethnic groups; provide multilingual resources and materials; and address the pastoral needs of migrant populations.

- Establish a relationship with the local diocesan refugee resettlement and immigration assistance office and volunteer by organizing charitable drives to benefit migrants and refugees, hosting job fairs, offering English-language tutoring, or planning a parish service day in migrant and refugee neighborhoods.
- Help keep parishioners informed on current public policy issues, coordinate letter-writing campaigns and visits with legislators, and assist in recruiting local attorneys to provide legal services and advice on immigration matters.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

Many resources are available online at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) to assist parishes and individuals in responding to God's call to welcome the newcomers in our midst. These include

### **USCCB Migration and Refugee Services**

Offers additional information on Catholic social teaching, current information on migration and refugee policy and advocacy issues, copies of the bishops' statements on migration, and other resources.

### **National Migration Week**

Provides educational and spiritual materials on migration.

### **Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity**

U.S. bishops' pastoral statement and accompanying parish kit of materials.

### **Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope**

Catholic campaign for immigration reform provides resources for parishes, policymakers, immigrants, and local organizers. Visit [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org).

**T**he Church supports immigrants through efforts involving service, social teaching, and instruction on living the faith. God's message of love guides us as a nation to focus on the common good through justice and mercy, and to work to alleviate the conditions that force people to leave their homelands, while protecting their rights when they reside among us.

## Related Titles

### **Welcoming the Stranger Among Us**

*Unity in Diversity*

The diversity of ethnicity, education, and social class of new immigrants challenges us to welcome them in ways that are respectful of their cultures and the receiving Church, and help them join our communities.

**English: No. 5-375, 80 pp.; Spanish: No. 5-848, 80 pp.**

### **God Is Love (*Deus Caritas Est*)**

The Holy Father explains the various dimensions of love and links the Church's charitable work with the love of God as Trinity, noting that the Church must express love through acts of justice and charity.

**English: No. 5-758, 64 pp.; Spanish: No. 5-922, 64 pp.**

### **St. Bahkita Prayer Card (bilingual)**

This prayer card is a powerful spiritual resource to be used to reflect on the challenges that confront the migrant population and to petition God for their protection during the immigration process.

**No. M7-266, package of 50**

To order these resources or to obtain a catalog of other USCCB titles, visit [www.usccbpublishing.org](http://www.usccbpublishing.org) or call toll-free 800-235-8722. Para pedidos en español, llame al 800-235-8722 y presione 4 para hablar con un representante del servicio al cliente en español.

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