



## WELCOMING OUR IMMIGRANT SISTERS AND BROTHERS



January 4, 2009  
*Feast of the Epiphany*

“...there are no more  
distinctions between  
Jew and Greek,  
slave and free,  
male and female, but all of  
you are one  
in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

# Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration

When advocating on behalf of our migrant, immigrant and refugee sisters and brothers, we must understand that the Catholic position is based on Catholic social teaching. Catholic social teaching is derived from:

- the Gospels and the words of Christ;
- Statements and Encyclicals of the Popes; and
- Statements and Pastoral Letters of Bishops from around the world, including the U.S. Bishops.

These teachings support the Minnesota Bishops’ and the U.S. Bishops’ public policy positions on immigration.

## Gospel Foundations

One need not look further than the life and words of Jesus to understand that people on the move – migrants, immigrants and refugees - are special in the eyes of God. As a baby, Jesus was a refugee who, along with the Holy Family, fled the terror of Herod into Egypt (Mt. 2:14-15). In His public ministry, Jesus Himself was an itinerant man, moving from place to place, “with no where to lay His Head...” (Mt. 8:20)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs us to welcome the stranger: “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) Jesus Himself was not welcomed by His own people: “He came to what was His own, but His own people did not accept him.” (Jn. 1:11)

When we welcome our immigrant sisters and brothers, we welcome Christ Himself; for in the face of our neighbors, we see the face of Christ. This is made clear in the Gospel of Luke when the disciples, on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24: 13-15), become witnesses to the Truth by welcoming the stranger - Christ.

## Papal Teachings

In the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), Pope Leo XIII established that people have a right to work to survive, and to support her or his family. Pope Pius XII, in the apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of the Migrant), reaffirms that migrants have a right to a life with dignity, and therefore a right to migrate toward that end: “Then, according to the teachings of *Rerum Novarum*, the right of the family to a life worthy of human dignity is recognized. When this happens, migration attains its natural scope...”

In the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), Pope John XXIII clearly articulates the right to migrate and the right not to migrate: “Every human being has the right to the freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of their country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate and take up residence elsewhere.” Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this basic teaching in an address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants in 1985: “Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.”

## **Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**

The U.S. Bishops have applied the Gospel teachings, and the teachings of the Popes, to immigration policy in the United States. In January 2003, the U.S. Bishops issued the Pastoral Letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In their Pastoral Letter, the U.S. Bishops articulated five governing principles as to how the Church should respond to immigration policy proposals:

### **1. People have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.**

This principle states that a person has a right *not* to migrate. In other words, economic, social, and political conditions in their homeland should provide an opportunity for a person to work and support his or her family with dignity and safety. In public policy terms, efforts should be made to address global economic inequities through just trade practices, economic development and debt relief. Peacemaking efforts should be advanced to end conflict, which, oftentimes forces people to flee their homes.

### **2. People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.**

When people are unable to find work and support themselves and their families, they have a right to migrate to other countries and work. This right is not absolute. As Pope John XXIII stated, the right to emigrate applies when “there are just reasons for it.” Today, global poverty is rampant and political unrest has resulted in wars and persecution. Consequently, migrants who are forced to leave their homes out of necessity, and seek only to survive and support their families, must be given special consideration.

### **3. Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders.**

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to protect and control their borders. However, this is not an absolute right. Nations also have an obligation to the universal common good, as articulated by Pope John XXII in *Pacem in Terris*, and thus should seek to accommodate migration to the greatest extent possible. According to Catholic social teaching, powerful economic nations, such as the United States, have a higher obligation to serve the universal common good. Because labor demands in the United States attract foreign laborers, the United States should establish an immigration system that legally and safely allows people to enter the nation to obtain jobs and reunite with family members.

#### **4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.**

People who flee their home countries because they fear persecution should be afforded safe haven and protection in another country. Conflict and political unrest in many parts of the world force people to leave their homes for fear of death or harm. The United States should employ a refugee and asylum system that protects asylum seekers and refugees, and offers them a haven from persecution.

#### **5. The human rights and dignity of undocumented immigrants should be respected.**

People who enter a nation without proper authorization or who over-stay their visas should be treated with respect and dignity. They should not be detained in deplorable conditions for lengthy periods of time, shackled by their feet and hands, or abused in any manner. They should be afforded due process of the law and, if applicable, allowed to articulate a fear of return to their home before a qualified adjudicator. They should not be blamed for the social ills of a nation.