

# Michigan Catholic Conference: Refugees deserve our help

Paul A. Long 11:30 p.m. EST December 18, 2015



(Photo: Santi Palacios / AP)

Two thousand years ago, a young woman named Mary gave birth in a stable. After being warned in a dream of coming violence, her husband, Joseph, gathered the family and fled Bethlehem.

The King of Judea, threatened by news of the child Jesus, had ordered all boys age 2 and younger to be put to death. In their escape from persecution, the Holy Family became refugees. Sadly, the family was neither the first nor the last to be displaced from their home due to violence, war or extreme conditions.

Today, hundreds of thousands of individuals and families are forced to flee their homes in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Middle East to escape persistent violence and terror. Pope Francis acknowledged the magnitude of this refugee crisis when he spoke before Congress in September, recognizing that it presents governments with difficult challenges and decisions. At the same time, he encouraged lawmakers to “view (the refugees) as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.”

In recent weeks, harsh and inflammatory rhetoric has regrettably emerged in discussions regarding refugees. Some have called for restrictions based on a person’s religious belief. It is true in the wake of recent terrorist attacks that safety must be a primary concern. Yet, as a nation, we cannot allow fear to lead us to sacrifice the values we hold close to our hearts.

America has long been a nation where individuals of all faiths have been able to create a life for themselves, where religious liberty is protected as a cornerstone value. Time and again the U.S. has shone as a safe haven from persecution, a place of opportunity for those desperate for peace and safety.

Restrictions on religious liberty, in all its forms, are both misguided and unconstitutional, ignoring the spirit of tolerance and respect upon which this nation prides itself. In fact, refugees of differing faiths and backgrounds have lost their homes and jobs. Many have personally witnessed the death of family members and loved ones. Contrary to public perception, those fleeing such senseless violence are not admitted into the U.S. on a whim.

Refugees are among the most scrutinized (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>) of all persons seeking to enter the country. Once the United Nations grants refugee status to an individual and refers them to the U.S. for resettlement, the individual faces a rigorous vetting process of checks and screenings that averages 18 to 24 months.

Some 2,234 Syrian refugees have entered the United States since October 2010 through the process, mostly women and children (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/250005.htm>). In our nation’s collective response, we can strive to “welcome the stranger,” specifically those who have been cleared by the government’s refugee approval process.

For decades, the Catholic Church has provided services that help resettle refugees of differing faiths. They come from war-torn countries and politically oppressive parts of the world. Today, the Church stands ready to assist additional refugees. In collaboration with other faith-based organizations, the Church wishes to recognize the dignity of each person by picking them up from the airport, finding safe and affordable housing, providing English as a second language and cultural inclusion classes, and offering financial literacy and employment services, among others.

Let us open our hearts and take the time to recognize the human face of all those who have been displaced with physical and emotional wounds, have no place to call home, and are searching for stability and safety. Let us also stay true to our founding principles, preserving our great nation as a place that welcomes and protects people of all religious beliefs.

Paul A. Long is president and CEO of Michigan Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in this state.

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