

focus

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Seeing Christ IN THE Immigrant

“The Catholic Church changed my life.”

Carmen's reflection on her life intertwined with the Church is one many Catholics may relate with.

She met her husband Cesar at church. Together, they previously worked for their local diocese and alongside religious sisters to serve the poor in their community. The couple and their two young boys are now parishioners at Gesu Catholic Church in Detroit, where Carmen volunteers as a Spanish tutor and Cesar is employed as the information technology specialist.

The Church was also there for Carmen and Cesar when they arrived in Michigan as immigrants from El Salvador. Besides the material support they received from their brothers and sisters in Christ, Carmen also found a sense of familiarity through the Church's liturgical life.

“When we come here and everything is new, I think [one of] the first things you feel like at home is going to the Mass,” she said.

Carmen and Cesar would not have left El Salvador if they did not have to, but like so many others, it was what was best for their family. Run-ins with the local gangs, and Carmen becoming pregnant, led to the couple applying for a tourist visa to visit Cesar's family in the U.S.

“This was not about money for us,” Carmen said about their reason for leaving. “It was really unsafe for us.”

The topic of immigration in this country is as complex as it is contentious. How should Catholics think about immigration and the migrants who land here? The people of God should let the truth of the faith guide their values and perspectives, rather than secular, political, or ideological sources.

This edition of **focus** will share the Church's perspective on immigration, which is guided by the fundamental Catholic social doctrines of upholding human dignity and caring for the poor and vulnerable. These teachings are a call to the faithful to remember the God-given dignity migrants possess regardless of their legal status, and to acknowledge the challenging circumstances that force migrants from their homelands. ■

Imagine having to flee to another country to protect your family and trying to establish a new life...

The Catholic approach to immigration flows directly from Our Lord, who identifies Himself among the “least brothers of mine.” Jesus includes “welcoming the stranger” as a work of mercy He asks us to perform for the poor and the vulnerable—and in turn, for Him.

“It’s a basic thing about solidarity,” said Susana Chapa Vargas, coordinator for Hispanic ministry for the Diocese of Lansing and an immigrant from Mexico herself. “When we don’t show solidarity towards our brothers and sisters, that shows ... the moral values that we really have. Are we really embracing the Catholic values, or not?”

Human dignity is not conditional on a person’s individual circumstances. All persons, including immigrants, possess God-given dignity regardless of their legal status within a country.

In recognizing the human dignity of the migrant, the Church is not offering support for illegal immigration. Rather, the Church calls on Catholics, and all people of goodwill, to respond to the needs of the individual person regardless of how he or she arrived. This is reflected in the Church’s work through its charitable agencies—including those in Michigan—to meet the humanitarian needs of migrants.

It also is important to recognize that immigrants and refugees are

among the most vulnerable members of society, and that Catholic social doctrine places emphasis on caring for the most vulnerable.

“In the case of pregnancy, who’s the most vulnerable? Well, the pregnant woman is vulnerable, and her unborn child even more vulnerable,” said Fr. Wayne Dziekan, vicar for Hispanic ministry for the Diocese of Gaylord. “Okay, so we look at immigration, who’s the vulnerable? ... The vulnerable is going to be the immigrant, the person who is seeking to come in or has come in.”

In *Dignitas Infinita*, a recent Vatican document on human dignity, it is noted that migrants “are among the first victims of multiple forms of poverty,” as their dignity is first “denied in their home countries.” The Church teaches that individuals have a natural right to migrate when the conditions for dignified living are absent in their place of origin. For Carmen and her family, their lives were at risk. For many others, poor economic conditions make it impossible to support themselves. In either case, many migrants have no choice but to find refuge elsewhere.

“They’ve come to the United States, not because they thought, ‘Oh, this is something I’ve always wanted to do.’ They were forced out of the place where they lived,” said Lesley Glennon, who since 1997 has led the immigration law clinic for Catholic Charities of Ingham, Eaton and Clinton counties within the Diocese of Lansing. “If they had the chance—everything being equal—of course they would stay where they grew up.”

Daris, who migrated here with her two daughters from Guatemala, listed several factors for why she had to leave. Not only did she escape from a domestic violence situation that was threatening her family, but the poor economic conditions also made it challenging to lead a stable life, exacerbated by the medical expenses incurred by one of



her daughters, who suffers from Rickets disease.

Since coming to the U.S., Daris' daughter has undergone one surgery and is awaiting a second procedure. Because of that, the authorities have allowed Daris and her family to stay in Detroit, where she lives and works. Her initial request for asylum was denied and she at one point was facing deportation.

"We go every year and have to sign papers with immigration so that they'll let us stay for another year," she said through a translator.

The uncertainty that Daris lives with is one reason why the Church's support of providing immigration legal services has a charitable dimension to it.

"They're here trying to survive, and one of the things that helps them to survive is to assist them to at least know that whatever else may be going on with employment [or] schooling for their kids, they don't have to worry about, 'Am I going to have to leave next month and be shipped back where I came from, where people want to kill me?'" Glennon said.

While migrants attest to the better conditions they find in the U.S., the challenges they face do not end upon arrival.

Dignitas Infinita notes that in their new home, migrants' lives are "put at risk because they no longer have the means to start a family, to work, or to feed themselves."

Undocumented individuals are among the most vulnerable of society, often forced to live in the shadows because of the fear of deportation and having to return to the dangers or hardships they were trying to escape.

"We do have a lot of people coming here for safety reasons, so they'd rather live in a country with nothing, and no documents, and no way to get legal employment ... than staying in their country where they could po-

What does the Church teach about immigration?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* succinctly summarizes the Catholic perspective on immigration in paragraph 2241:

"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.

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."

tentially come across harm or death," said Samantha Lindberg, program director of the Immigration Assistance Program for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Kalamazoo.

This is not something most Americans can fathom, though imagine having to flee to another country to protect your family and trying to establish a new life—finding housing, a job to afford food and necessities, schooling and healthcare for children—without knowing the language or the laws. This is where the Church, through the members of the Body of Christ, has proved crucial in the lives of immigrants who needed the help of others to find their footing here.

"I think it's really important to have the Church help because we come without knowing our rights, without knowing the laws, and really without knowing where to turn," Daris said.

One example of the Church's support for migrants is through the work of Strangers No Longer, a Catholic-affiliated group in Michigan that helps immigrants through its "circles of support" that form in parishes and other communities.

For Daris, the group has connected her with legal re-

sources, provided transportation to her daughter's medical appointments, and found her a psychologist to work through the various traumas she's faced.

Carmen attributes Strangers No Longer—named for the joint pastoral letter authored by the U.S. and Mexican bishops in 2003—for helping her family plug into their parish and finding an apartment for them.

"It's really nice to have these circles of support, because it's people who are organized and are [helping] someone in need," she said.

Another individual who has benefited from the group's assistance is Felipe, who left Mexico to escape

the violence of the cartels and to seek better healthcare after his wife suffered a miscarriage.

Felipe found work in Michigan, but was injured on the job, leaving him unable to support himself for several months. To make matters worse, his wife's tourist visa expired, forcing her return to Mexico and leaving him alone in Michigan as he awaits surgery.

"I reached a point where I hit bottom and I didn't know what to do," he said through a translator. He eventually found Strangers No Longer, which is trying to get his surgery arranged in addition to connecting him to their community of support.

"Thanks to Strangers No Longer, I've been able to survive all this," he said.

By encouraging care for migrants, the Church is not calling on Catholics to support illegal immigration or open borders. Church teaching has been clear for decades that nations have the right to regulate migration, and that migrants should obey the laws of the country they enter.

As with any other cultural or public policy issue, the call to the faithful is to form their consciences and beliefs based on the social teachings of Christ.

"Our opinions ... as Catholics should not be based on political ideology," Fr. Dziekan said. "It should be based on our faith. It should be based on finding Christ in the other."

The job of the people of faith is to lift others up, Fr. Dziekan said. Believers are called to first recognize "Christ in front of me" rather than labeling immigrants based on their status, and that starts within each individual's heart.

"If we're serious about seeing Christ in our neighbor, if we really believe that, but we find that we are angry at a per-



Bishop David J. Walkowiak of the Diocese of Grand Rapids speaks with immigrants as part of a Mass for Migrants the bishop celebrates annually.

son who does not have legal status ... then we don't know Jesus Christ," Fr. Dziekan said.

The experiences of migrants forced to leave their homes to find refuge here is an invitation to Catholics—particularly amidst the national dialogue around immigration—to first empathize with their migrant brothers and sisters.

"The people we serve, they're just like you," Glennon said of her immigrant clients. "The things that you want in your life, it's the same thing, what they want ... so it's not some 'other.' It's us." ■

Key Principles on Immigration Based on the Teachings of the Church

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland. When the conditions necessary for a dignified life are absent, individuals have the natural right to migrate to support themselves and their family.
- More prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome those in search of the security and means of livelihood unavailable in their country of origin.
- Countries have the right to maintain their borders and regulate immigration, consistent with the common good and with respect for the sanctity of human life.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The God-given dignity and rights of undocumented immigrants should be respected.
- Immigrants have a responsibility to respect the country that receives them.

As compiled and presented by U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops



A Catholic Perspective on Immigration Reform

As recognized by the Church for decades, the American immigration system is inadequate for a multitude of reasons. Below are the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' proposed elements of immigration reform that have been shared with all members of Congress and the administration.

Enforcement efforts should be targeted, proportional, and humane. Deportations should always be carried out with due regard for families, community ties, and religious liberty interests, and enforcement measures should focus on those who present genuine dangers to society.

Humanitarian protections and due process should be ensured. Refugee resettlement, asylum, and temporary protected status, as well as visas for victims of trafficking and abused youth are essential components of an immigration system. Immigration processes, whether affirmative or defensive, must also be subject to due process.

Long-time residents should have an earned pathway to citizenship. Providing legal processes for long-time residents and other undocumented immigrants to regularize their status would strengthen the American economy, provide stability to communities, and keep families together.

Family unity should remain a cornerstone of the U.S. immigration system. Immigration reform measures should be evaluated according to whether they strengthen families and promote family unity.

Legal pathways should be expanded, reliable, and efficient. Unreliable and inadequate processes have contributed to an increase in irregular migration. Improving and increasing opportunities for people to lawfully enter the country, on both a temporary and permanent basis, are necessary steps to address family separations and regional labor shortages.

The root causes of forced migration should be addressed. There are a multitude of factors causing people to migrate in large numbers, often as the only way to sustain or protect human life. This cannot be addressed unilaterally or by shifting responsibility; it requires meaningful cooperation between the United States and other countries. ■

Common Questions About Catholic Teaching and Immigration

Below are common questions Catholics may have regarding the Church's teaching on immigration and the Church's care for migrants. Responses are grounded in Church teachings that include the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and papal encyclical guidance.

Does the Catholic Church advocate for "open borders"? No. The *Catechism* states that political authorities "may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions."¹ This includes a sovereign country's right to regulate and secure its borders. The Church does maintain, however, that this right must always be balanced with the duty to welcome newcomers with charity and respect for the human person, as well as the rights to life and religious liberty.

What does the Church say about illegal immigration and undocumented migrants? The Catholic Church affirms the rule of law and encourages the use of lawful immigration pathways. The Church does not encourage unnecessary or irregular migration: "Ideally, unnecessary migration ought to be avoided."² The *Catechism* states that "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."³

Forced migrants, such as refugees and asylum seekers, may be precluded from pursuing a visa or some other advance permission to enter the country because they face life-threatening situations or other serious dangers. The element of danger or being forc-

ibly displaced gives rise to a human right to seek protection through irregular means as opposed to migrating through ordinary channels. Within the reality of irregular entry to the United States, authorities must protect the dignity and safety of vulnerable persons from forms of evil such as human, labor or sexual trafficking.

Why do Catholic organizations serve people who enter the U.S. without authorization? Faithful to Jesus' mandate to "welcome the stranger," Catholic-affiliated organizations provide basic human needs to migrants in acknowledgment of their inherent God-given dignity and as a visible sign of God's love and mercy to those in need. Pope St. John Paul II said that "As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community."⁴

What services do Catholic organizations provide to migrants and refugees? The Church provides humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees,

often at the request of local, state, and federal governments. Among the services Catholic organizations provide include resettlement and integration services to newly arrived legal refugees, affordable immigration legal services, and basic humanitarian needs like meals, clean clothes, medical attention, and temporary shelter. The Church and its clergy also endeavor to provide access to the Sacraments for migrants, including in their native languages.

Does usccb profit from its programs for migrants and refugees? No. The U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services receives federal funding to assist with the lawful resettlement of refugees who have been vetted by the federal government, but the costs of the program exceed the funds received for the program. An independent report confirmed that usccb's financial numbers indicate that it spends more on refugee resettlement than it receives from the federal government. For example, in 2023, the U.S. bishops' office spent \$134 million in services while receiving \$130 million from the federal government. The usccb also notes that most of the funding received from the federal government is passed onto local organizations, such as the regional Catholic Charities agencies, which directly serve these newcomers. ■



A digital version of this edition of *Focus*, along with footnotes and additional resources not presented here, is available at micatholic.org/migration.

All photos courtesy Dr. Eric Bouwens for the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

