



## Social Justice Resource

### *Encountering Christ: A Celebration of Migrants and Refugees*

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#### EXPERIENCE

2017-2018 has been a watershed time for immigration awareness. The news cycle has been inundated with immigration crises, and it is impossible to remain oblivious to these events. We have watched children being torn away from their parents as they have fled violence and poverty, seeking refuge in our country – many never to be reunited. We have stood by as neighbors in our communities have been deported, rupturing homes and families and depriving children of stability. We have heard migrants and refugees being described in dehumanizing terms meant to evoke fear rather than compassion.<sup>1</sup> Refugee resettlement has been limited to its lowest number in history,<sup>2</sup> and pervasive factors of persecution, such as gang violence and domestic abuse, have been eliminated as relevant factors to refugee and asylum claims. Young adults who were brought to the United States illegally as children, who know no other home, now live in limbo waiting for a final decision on the order to revoke their legal status through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. People from predominately-Muslim countries are no longer admitted to the U.S. Most recently, asylum-seekers have been told that they must wait to enter the U.S. through legal entry points, or their claims will be automatically denied – and we have learned of the persecution or death of many of those denied asylum.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, immigrants – both documented and unauthorized – have strengthened American

communities and contributed to the economy in significant ways. Many graduated college and pursued their career goals. Business initiatives have taken off under the leadership of immigrant entrepreneurs. Migrant workers have ensured the success of the agricultural and construction industries. Parishes have been invigorated with new cultural traditions, as more than one-fourth of U.S. Catholic adults are foreign-born.<sup>4</sup> Our communities are richer and stronger because of immigrants.



#### ANALYSIS

Unfortunately, fear-inducing rhetoric has successfully influenced many Americans, framing the response to these experiences. Studies show that misinformation has permeated the consciousness of many Americans, leading to distorted views of immigrants, the issues they face, and U.S. immigration policy – which, in turn, fuels anti-immigrant sentiment and laws. For

example, the average estimate by U.S. citizens concerning the number of immigrants (documented and undocumented) in the country is nearly 3-times more than the actual number (36% versus 13%).<sup>5</sup> The survey data reveals that “the overestimates are largest among particular groups: the least educated, workers in low-skill occupations with lots of immigrants, and those on the political right. They [also] overstate the share of immigrants who are Muslim and understate the share of Christians. They underestimate immigrants’ education and overestimate both their poverty rate and their dependence on welfare.”<sup>6</sup> Studies also show that while natives’ views can be influenced negatively toward immigration by media and political propaganda, “people exposed to positive images of immigrants – say, about their strong commitment to work – become much less negative in general about immigration.”<sup>7</sup>

To highlight the positive and integral role of immigrants in our communities, the following paragraphs celebrate the richness and vitality immigrant people bring and counter the most common misperceptions about immigrant people.

### ***Economic Growth and Unemployment***

While many people believe that immigrants “steal American jobs” and that undocumented immigrants in particular drain the economy by avoiding taxes while using public services, the reality is the opposite. According to the Brookings Institute, “Immigrants tend to have relatively small impacts on the wages of native-born workers. At the same time, immigrants generally have positive impacts on both government finances and the innovation that leads to productivity growth.”<sup>8</sup> Research shows that immigrants – authorized and otherwise – sustain the economy by filling in gaps in the job market that are notoriously difficult to fill, especially during periods of low unemployment. In the labor sectors, there are not enough American workers willing to replace them. “Each job they perform sustains two to three jobs in the surrounding economy, so even though few Americans seek this field and farm work, the jobs of many Americans and many communities are sustained by their contributions.”<sup>9</sup> The sectors that

employ the largest numbers of immigrants, such as construction, agriculture, and domestic services would implode without the participation of their immigrant workers.

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– Brookings Institute

Beyond bolstering the economy and job growth by sustaining certain labor sectors, immigrants are responsible for creating thousands of jobs, directly. Immigrant entrepreneurs own twenty-five percent of new businesses in the United States,<sup>10</sup> and half of all billion-dollar startup companies in 2016 were founded or co-founded by immigrants, creating over 33,000 new jobs.<sup>11</sup>

Further, all immigrants – authorized and otherwise – pay taxes through sales tax and property tax, and many pay income tax, as well, with a unique identification code that does not require a social security number. In fact, “The IRS estimates that undocumented immigrants pay over \$9 billion in withheld payroll taxes annually. Undocumented immigrants also help make the Social Security system more solvent, as they pay into the system but are ineligible to collect benefits upon retiring. In 2010, \$12 billion more was collected from Social Security payroll taxes of undocumented workers than were paid out in benefits.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Education***

Immigrants achieve education levels comparable to that of their American-born counterparts. Approximately one-third of immigrants living in the U.S. have earned at least a college degree, and foreign-born residents are actually more likely than American-born to have a doctorate or

professional degree.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, “All immigrant groups, including those whose members typically arrive in the United States with low levels of education, show strong intergenerational progress on educational attainment, and second-generation Americans from most groups meet or exceed the education levels attained by the children of native-born Americans.”<sup>14</sup>



### **Crime**

The common accusation that immigrants “bring crime and violence” has no basis in fact. I should note, here, that the first time a person crosses the U.S. border without documentation, it is a misdemeanor, and it is always fully legal if the migrant seeks to claim asylum. Once they are in the U.S., through any means, people who have migrated to the U.S. are much less likely to commit crimes or be incarcerated than their American-born counterparts.<sup>15</sup> In addition, “Evidence suggests that providing legal resident status to unauthorized immigrants causes a reduction in crime. ... Conversely, restricting access to legal employment for unauthorized immigrants leads to an increased crime rate, particularly for offenses that help to generate income.”<sup>16</sup>

### **“Legal” Entry**

We often hear people say that they are not opposed to immigration, only to *illegal* immigration – “If people want to come to this country, they should come through the proper channels!” The problem with this approach is that the current system of legal entry to the U.S. is failing. For one thing, the backlog is so heavy that it can take years for applications to be processed, and there is a limit to the number of visas granted to migrants from a single country.<sup>17</sup> This means, for example, that spouses whose partners are legal U.S. residents have to endure lengthy separations – in some cases 20 years or more – unless they decide it would be worth the risk to keep their family together while waiting for the application to be approved.<sup>18</sup>

Second, there are not enough guest worker visas available to support the many industries that depend upon the work of temporary migrants.<sup>19</sup> The industries that have a need for migrant workers attract those who have no prospects of work in their home countries, and when the work is completed, those migrant workers often remain in the U.S. rather than returning home so that they will not have to risk the dangerous border crossing again. If, however, they were permitted to cross legally and were assured of a safe return the next year, many would return home in between seasons of work. In addition, the current guest worker program itself is severely flawed and conducive to human trafficking, so increasing protections for migrant workers is imperative.

Third, the current administration has restricted the avenues for legal immigration through various means. Severe limits have been set on the reasons that qualify a person for asylum and the ways in which a person can apply. This violates international and U.S. law, since it is an

international principle that people can apply for asylum in any country where they feel safe, regardless of the means through which they enter that country; and, further, in order to apply for asylum, a person must be physically present in the host country. Refugee admissions also have been limited to the lowest number in history. Additionally, there have been proposals to disqualify immigrants from citizenship if they have used public funds, and to further limit family-oriented migration in favor of “merit-based” migration (despite the fact, as noted above, that immigrants provide important skills in labor sectors and are likely to meet or exceed the education levels of U.S. citizens by the second generation).

Finally, instability and violence are driving factors of migration. Central America, for example, is one of the most violent regions in the world. The foreign policy of the U.S. in that region has fueled the political instability and subsequent violence, as our government has armed and funded political dictators and human-rights violators.<sup>20</sup> Also, the U.S. is a leading contributor to greenhouse emissions, which destabilizes the region through climate-related conflicts and poverty. Discouraging unauthorized migration must entail accepting responsibility and attempting to mitigate our own role in motivating the need to migrate. Further, it is incumbent upon us all – and especially upon those purport to support immigrants, but not “illegal” immigrants – to advocate for immigration policies that uphold the dignity of all human beings – including its expression through work – and prioritize and protect families. A robust immigration policy will be one that facilitates authentic human development in unstable nations – particularly those which the U.S. government has had a role in destabilizing – so that people are able to flourish in their home countries without being coerced to

migrate, in addition to opening avenues for those who seek to work or make a home here.

## REFLECTION

Catholic social thought (CST) holds a very clear position on immigration:

Human beings have the right to migrate to a “political community where [they hope they] can more fittingly provide a future for [themselves] and [their] dependents. Wherefore, as far as the common good permits, it is the duty of that state to accept such immigrants and to help to integrate them into itself as new members.”<sup>21</sup> As the Bishops

of the border between Texas and Northern Mexico have explained this, “All persons have a right to live in conditions worthy of human life. If these are not given, they have a right to migrate.”<sup>22</sup> In other words,

*All persons have a right to live in conditions worthy of human life.*

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– Bishops of the border between Texas and Northern Mexico

the primary right of persons is to live in a place where one can flourish – where one can live with one’s family in freedom and security and can participate through work and expression in one’s community.<sup>23</sup> If this right – naturally endowed by the dignity of the human person – is violated, one has a right to find a home where it is upheld. Further, it is the duty of the entire human family – including governments – to affirm these rights by facilitating integral human development in every place through both foreign and domestic policy, and welcoming migrants who are seeking a better life. While CST affirms a nation’s right to secure its borders, “a country’s regulation of borders and control of immigration must be governed by concern for all people and by mercy and justice. A nation may not simply decide that it wants to provide for its own people and no others. A sincere commitment to the needs of all must prevail.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, at a basic level, “immigration policy ought to take into account other important values such as the right of families to live together. A merciful immigration policy will not force married couples or children to live separated



from their families for long periods” or else live together in conditions of poverty and violence.<sup>25</sup>

Pope Francis has developed “Twenty Points on Migration” to help individuals and nations understand and uphold the rights of migrants and refugees. These twenty points are based on four verbs: to welcome, which “calls on governments to expand the legal avenues that would allow migrants to enter a country legally and start a new life;”<sup>26</sup> to protect, which “may be understood as a series of steps intended to defend the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, independent of their legal status;”<sup>27</sup> to promote, which “essentially means a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees – as well as the communities which welcome them – are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity;”<sup>28</sup> and to integrate, which calls us all to “embrace all those fleeing from war and hunger, or forced by discrimination, persecution, poverty and environmental degradation to leave their homelands,”<sup>29</sup> where “embracing” means to desire and facilitate their active participation in our communities. Importantly, “Integration should not be confused with a process of assimilation, where the migrant loses her cultural heritage completely, but instead as a process in which an individual’s cultural heritage can help to enrich the daily life of their host country, which in time can also become their home country.”<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, “The proper implementation of human rights becomes truly beneficial for migrants, as well as for the sending and receiving countries. The measures suggested are not a mere concession to migrants. They are in the interest of migrants, host societies, and the international community at large. Promoting and respecting the human rights of migrants and their dignity ensures that everyone’s rights and dignity in society are fully respected.”<sup>31</sup> As discussed above, immigrants to the U.S. benefit the economy and improve labor markets. Beyond these

objective measures, however, immigrants also enrich and revitalize our communities by sharing their culture and unique worldviews – “we should cherish and celebrate the contributions of immigrants and their cultures!”<sup>32</sup>



It is fundamental to CST that all human beings are made in the image of God. This means, of course, that all persons possess certain fundamental rights, such as the rights to life, freedom, and migration. What is often underemphasized, however, is that each person is made as a *unique* image of God, which means that every person reveals aspects of God’s love and creativity that otherwise would remain hidden. In other words, the particular characteristics that constitute each individual person reflect God in particular ways, so when we encounter another person, God is revealed to us in a way previously unknown. Thus, as we encounter migrant people, we should be grateful for the grace of meeting God in new ways. The potential and creativity embodied in each person should be welcomed and encouraged for the flourishing of the individual and the entire human family. As the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame recognizes, “Immigrants are vital contributors to U.S. and Canadian society and are entitled to the opportunity to develop their lives and contribute to their nation as they are able.” And always, we should remember the words of Jesus: “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

*“Encountering migrants is an opportunity – it transforms us.  
It gives us back our humanity.”*

– Sister Norma Pimentel, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley

## ACTION

“The history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the United States and Canada is inextricably connected to the immigrant experience” (AMSSND Corporate Stance on Immigration). Below are some suggested actions for pursuing justice for all immigrants:

1. **Find ways to welcome immigrants in your community.** Look up local organizations or parish events that will enable you to encounter people from other countries and cultures. If you are an immigrant, please share your experience and reach out to others with similar circumstances and to your American-born community.
2. **Advocate for migrants with friends, family and publicly.** Speak up to counter misconceptions about immigrants and immigration processes, and make sure to participate in our Voter Voice campaigns as they come out! Continue to urge your representatives to adopt just immigration policies. Call your elected officials (switchboard [202] 224-3121). Write them letters and postcards.
  - a. In accord with the AMSSND Corporate Stance on Immigration, advocate for the following policies:
    - Pathways to citizenship for undocumented persons in the United States
    - Family reunification as a priority in immigration policy
    - Opportunities and protections for low-skilled immigrants to come and work in the United States
    - Due process protections within our immigration enforcement policies
    - Addressing the root causes of migration such as global, economic, environmental and social injustices
    - Effective and humane border security that recognizes the human rights of all people
  - b. **For those in Canada,** [urge your government](#) to welcome asylum-seekers and refugees, who are [increasingly trying to enter Canada](#) from the U.S. due to the hostilities of the U.S. government.
3. **Pray with us!** Join us as we [pray a novena for migrants and refugees](#) during this time of Las Posadas.
4. **Send notes of encouragement** to detained migrant people. Below are some addresses to use:
  - Annunciation House, 815 Myrtle Avenue, El Paso, Texas 79901
  - Humanitarian Respite Center  
C/o Catholic Charities, San Juan Office, 700 North Virgen de San Juan Blvd., San Juan, TX 78589

5. Please read the AMSSND [Corporate Stance on Immigration](#).
  
6. Donate to or volunteer with organizations who are helping the migrants now and/or working to mitigate the root causes of immigration, including:
  - a. For those in the U.S.:
    - [Catholic Charities/USA](#)
    - [Catholic Relief Services](#)
    - [Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley](#) (directed by Sister Norman Pimentel)
    - [Kino Border Initiative](#) (a Jesuit ministry)
    - [Catholic Legal Immigration Network \(CLINIC\)](#). Legal help is very important right now particularly for asylum seekers.
    - [The Family Reunification Fund](#)
  
  - b. For those in Canada:
    - [Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Services](#)
    - [Catholic Centre for Immigrants - Ottawa](#)
    - [Kairos Canada](#)
    - [Diocese of Ontario Refugee Support](#)
    - [Sisters of Saint Joseph](#)
    - [Diocese of Hamilton: Office for Refugees](#)
  
7. For more information, please visit the following websites:
  - [The Vatican's Migrant and Refugee Office](#)
  - [The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops office of Migration and Refugee Services:](#)
  - [Jesuit Refugee Service/International](#)
  - [Jesuit Refugee Service/USA](#)
  - [The Kino Border Initiative](#)
  - [International Catholic Border Initiative](#)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Trump\\_Caravan\\_Oct22.pdf](https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Trump_Caravan_Oct22.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-cap-refugee-admissions-at-30-000-in-2019-pompeo-says-1537222609>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/when-deportation-is-a-death-sentence>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/14/a-closer-look-at-catholic-america/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-dozen-facts-about-immigration/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/8-million-people-are-working-illegally-in-the-us-here's-why-that's-unlikely-to-change/ar-BBQOxb4?ocid=spartanntp#image=BBQOxb4\\_1|2](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/8-million-people-are-working-illegally-in-the-us-here's-why-that's-unlikely-to-change/ar-BBQOxb4?ocid=spartanntp#image=BBQOxb4_1|2)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dinahwisenberg/2018/07/31/immigrant-entrepreneurs-form-25-of-new-u-s-business-researchers/#1a891afb713b>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/immigrants-created-half-the-billion-dollar-startups-in-2016-charts-2018-6>

<sup>12</sup> <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/how-do-undocumented-immigrants-pay-federal-taxes-an-explainer/>

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- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/immigrants-and-higher-education>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/immigrants-and-higher-education>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-dozen-facts-about-immigration/>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-dozen-facts-about-immigration/>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/why-don't-they-just-get-line>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/why-don't-they-just-get-line>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/8-million-people-are-working-illegally-in-the-us-here's-why-that's-unlikely-to-change/ar-BBQOxb4?ocid=spartanntp>
- <sup>20</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/march99/guatemala11.htm>;  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/10/29/american-policy-is-responsible-migrant-caravan/?utm\\_term=.00ad2c1afe40](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/10/29/american-policy-is-responsible-migrant-caravan/?utm_term=.00ad2c1afe40)
- <sup>21</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, Encyclical letter on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and liberty, Vatican Web site, April 11, 1963, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html), III.106.
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/upload/immigration-statement-from-tex-mex-bishops-2017-02-15.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>
- <sup>24</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>
- <sup>26</sup> [https://justiceforimmigrants.org/2016site/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/20-points-\\_simplified.pdf](https://justiceforimmigrants.org/2016site/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/20-points-_simplified.pdf)
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- <sup>31</sup> Statement of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 29th Session of the Human Rights Council Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Migrants Geneva, 15 June 2015.
- <sup>32</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>