

# Catholic Social Teaching and Migration

## Background

In advocating on behalf of migrants, immigrants, and refugees, it is important to understand that the Catholic position is based on Catholic social teaching, which is derived from the Gospels and the words of Christ; statements and encyclicals of the Popes; and statements and pastoral letters of bishops around the world, including the bishops of the United States. In *Strangers No Longer Together On The Journey Of Hope* (2003), bishops of the United States and Mexico wrote, "Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving."

## Gospel Foundations

There is a long Biblical foundation for hospitality, but nowhere is it made more clear that persons on the move—refugees, migrants, immigrants—are special in the eyes of God than the life and words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

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 was an itinerant preacher, moving from place to place, "with nowhere 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).

As we welcome the stranger into our midst, we welcome Christ Himself, for in the face of the migrant, immigrant, and refugee, we must see the face of Christ. In the Gospel of Luke, this is made clear in the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24: 13-15), as they become witnesses to the Truth by welcoming the stranger, who is Christ.

## Papal Teachings

In the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*), Pope Leo XIII established that persons have a right to work to survive and to support his or her 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."

Saint 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."

Pope Benedict XVI continued this positive message in relation to immigration. During a visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI called on Americans "to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrow and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home. This, indeed, is what your fellow countrymen have done for generations. From the beginning, they have opened their doors to the tired, the poor, the 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' These are the people whom America has made her own."

Since his inaugural trip to Lampedusa, Pope Francis has worked to highlight the dignity of migrants. He has consistently spoken out on the plight of immigrants and called people to stand in solidarity with them. In his message before the United States Congress in 2015, he stated: We must not be taken aback by their [migrants] numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation. To respond in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal."

**For more information on Catholic social teaching on migration, visit [cliniclegal.org/CST](http://cliniclegal.org/CST).**



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