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# STRANGERS NO LONGER

## Together on the Journey of Hope

IN CONDENSED FORM

*As immigration policies take a front seat in our national political scene, Catholic Update offers this condensation of a groundbreaking joint letter of U.S. and Mexican bishops.*

In discerning the signs of the times, we note the greatly increased migration among the peoples of the Americas, and we see in this but one manifestation of a worldwide phenomenon—often called globalization—which brings with it great promises along with multiple challenges.

We speak as two episcopal conferences but as one Church, united in the view that migration between our two

nations is necessary and beneficial. At the same time, some aspects of the migrant experience are far from the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed: Many persons who seek to migrate are suffering, and, in some cases, tragically dying; human rights are abused; families are kept apart; and racist and xenophobic attitudes remain.

We the bishops of Mexico and the United States seek to awaken our peoples to the mysterious presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the person of the migrant and to renew in them the values of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed.

As pastors to more than ninety million Mexican Catholics and 65 million U.S.

Catholics, we witness the human consequences of migration in the life of society every day. We witness the vulnerability of our people involved in all sides of the migration phenomenon, including families devastated by the loss of loved ones who have undertaken the migration journey and children left alone when parents are removed from them.

We observe the struggles of land-owners and enforcement personnel who seek to preserve the common good without violating the dignity of the migrant. And we share in the concern of religious and social service providers who, without violating civil law, attempt to respond to the migrant knocking at the door.



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## A common history

**A**merica is a continent born of immigrant peoples who came to inhabit these lands and who from north to south gave birth to new civilizations. It was precisely within the historical processes of forced and voluntary movements that faith in Christ entered into these lands and extended all over the continent. Faith in Christ has thus “shaped [our] religious profile, marked by moral values which, though they are not always consistently practiced and at times are cast into doubt, are in a sense the heritage of all Americans, even of those who do not explicitly recognize this fact” (*Ecclesia in America* #14).

At the present time, the interdependence and integration of our two peoples is clear. According to U.S. government statistics, about 800,000 Mexicans enter the United States each day. Cross-border U.S. and Mexican investment has reached unprecedented levels in recent years.

Moreover, each year the United States admits between 150,000 to 200,000 Mexicans into the country as legal permanent residents, amounting to nearly 20 percent of the total number of legal permanent residents admitted each year. A significant number of U.S. citizens live, work, and retire in Mexico. In addition to this present interdependence, Mexico and the United States

have been bound historically by spiritual connections.

Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity.

## Migration and the Word of God

**T**he Word of God and the Catholic social teaching it inspires illuminate an understanding—one that is ultimately full of hope—that recognizes the lights and shadows that are a part of the ethical, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of migrations between our two countries.

Recalling the migration of the Chosen People from Egypt, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph themselves were refugees in Egypt: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Mt 2:15). From this account the Holy Family has become a figure with whom Christian migrants and refugees throughout the ages can identify, giving them hope and courage in hard times.

St. Matthew also describes the mysterious presence of Jesus in the migrants who frequently lack food and drink and are detained in prison (Mt 25:35-36). The “Son of Man” who “comes in his glory” (Mt 25:31) will judge his followers by the way they respond to those in such need: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers

of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

The triumph of grace in the Resurrection of Christ plants hope in the hearts of all believers, and the Spirit works in the Church to unite all peoples of all races and cultures into the one family of God (Eph 2:17-20).

The Holy Spirit has been present throughout the history of the Church to work against injustice, division, and oppression and to bring about respect for individual human rights, unity of races and cultures, and the incorporation of the marginalized into full life in the Church. In modern times, one of the ways this work of the Spirit has been manifested is through Catholic social teaching, in particular the teachings on human dignity and the principle of solidarity.

## Migration and Catholic social teaching

**C**atholic teaching has a long and rich tradition in defending the right to migrate. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, the Church’s teaching has provided the basis for the development of basic principles regarding the right to migrate for those attempting to exercise their God-given human rights. Catholic teaching also states that the root causes of migration—poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts—must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families.

In his landmark encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Blessed Pope John XXIII expands the right to migrate as well as the right to not have to migrate: “Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there” (#25).

Pope John XXIII placed limits on immigration, however, when there are “just reasons for it.” Nevertheless, he stressed the obligation of sovereign states to promote the universal good where possible, including an obligation to accommodate migration flows. For more powerful nations, a stronger obligation exists.

Both of our episcopal conferences have echoed the rich tradition of church teachings with regard to migration.

Five principles emerge from such teachings: 1) Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland; 2) Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families; 3) Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders; 4) Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection; 5) The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

### *Toward conversion and communion*

**T**he Church in our two countries is constantly challenged to see the face of Christ, crucified and risen, in the stranger.

The whole Church is challenged to live the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-25), as they are converted to be witnesses of the Risen Lord after they welcome him

as a stranger. Faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant leads to a conversion of mind and heart, which leads to a renewed spirit of communion and to the building of structures of solidarity.

Part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism; accepting migrants not as foreboding aliens, terrorists, or economic threats, but rather as persons with dignity and rights, revealing the presence of Christ; and recognizing migrants as bearers of deep cultural values and rich faith traditions.

Conversion of mind and heart leads to communion expressed through hospitality on the part of receiving communities and a sense of belonging and welcome on the part of those in the communities where migrants are arriving. The New Testament often counsels that hospitality is a virtue necessary for all followers of Jesus. Many migrants, sensing rejection or indifference from Catholic communities, have sought solace outside the Church. They experience the sad fate of Jesus,

recorded in St. John's Gospel: "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11).

### *Public policy challenge and responses*

**T**he United States and Mexico share a special relationship that requires focused attention upon joint concerns.

The realities of migration between both nations require comprehensive policy responses implemented in unison by both countries.

Now is the time for both the United States and Mexico to confront the reality of globalization and to work toward a globalization of solidarity. We call upon both governments to cooperate and to jointly enact policies that will create a generous, legal flow of migrants between both nations.

Persons should have the opportunity to remain in their homeland to support and to find full lives for themselves and their families. This is the ideal situation for which the world and both countries must strive: one in which migration flows are driven by choice, not necessity. Paramount to achieving this goal is the need to develop the economies of sending nations, including Mexico.

Only a long-term effort that adjusts economic inequalities between the United States and Mexico will provide Mexican workers with employment opportunities that will allow them to remain at home and to support themselves and their families.

The creation of employment opportunities in Mexico would help to reduce poverty and would mitigate the incentive for many migrants to look for employment in the United States.

### *Family-based immigration*

**A**s pastors, we are troubled by how the current amalgamation of immigration laws, policies, and actions pursued by both governments often impedes family unity. While the majority of Mexican migrants enter the United States to find work, many

## **A PLEA FOR**

# *Comprehensive Immigration Reform*

The U.S. Catholic bishops acknowledge that immigration is an emotional and challenging issue which has engaged the American public, including members of the Catholic faithful. We have heard from Catholics and others of good will who both agree and disagree with us on how best to respond to the immigration crisis our nation faces today.

Each day in our parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools we witness the human consequences of an immigration system which is seriously flawed: Families are divided, migrants are exploited and abused by smugglers and human traffickers, and, in some cases, men, women and children who attempt to come here in search of a better life perish in the American desert and on the seas.

Because of these realities, we believe that the status quo is morally unacceptable and must be changed. Since our nation's immigration policy does impact the basic dignity and life of the human person, it needs to be reformed urgently to uphold human dignity and to protect human life.

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), we will continue to work with Congress and the President to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation consistent with these principles. In the end, our immigration laws should be just and humane and reflect the values—fairness, opportunity, and compassion—upon which our nation, a nation of immigrants, was built.

—Bishop William Skylstad, president, U.S. bishops, June 2006

## IMMIGRATION

### Four Key Strategies

- We urge communities to offer migrant families hospitality, not hostility, along their journey.
- We commend church communities that have established migrant shelters that provide appropriate pastoral and social services to migrants.
- We encourage Catholics and all people of good will to work with the community to address the causes of undocumented migration and to protect the human rights of all migrants.
- We call on the local church to help newcomers integrate in ways that are respectful, that celebrate their cultures, and that are responsive to their social needs, leading to a mutual enrichment of the local church.

cross the border to join family members.

The U.S. legal immigration system places per-country limits on visas for family members of U.S. legal permanent residents from Mexico. This cap, along with processing delays, has resulted in unacceptable waiting times for the legal reunification of a husband and wife, or of a parent and child.

For example, the spouse or child of a Mexican-born legal permanent resident can wait approximately eight years to obtain a visa to join loved ones in the United States. Spouses and parents thus face a difficult decision: either honor their moral commitment to family and migrate to the United States without proper documentation, or wait in the system and face indefinite separation from loved ones.

This is an unacceptable choice, and a policy that encourages undocumented migration. In order to ensure that families remain together, reform of the U.S.

family-based legal immigration categories vis-à-vis Mexico is necessary. A new framework must be established that will give Mexican families more opportunities to legally reunite with their loved ones in the United States. This would help alleviate the long waiting times and, in time, would reduce undocumented migration between the United States and Mexico.

Approximately 10.5 million Mexican-born persons currently live in the United States, about 5.5 million of whom reside legally, and the remainder of whom have undocumented status.

A broad legalization program of the undocumented would benefit not only the migrants but also both nations. Making legal the large number of undocumented workers from many nations who are in the United States would help to stabilize the labor market in the United States, to preserve family unity, and to improve the standard of living in immigrant communities.

### Border enforcement policies

**O**f particular concern are the border enforcement policies pursued by both governments that have contributed to the abuse and even deaths of migrants in both Mexico and the United States. Along the United States-Mexico border, the U.S. government has launched several border-blockade initiatives in the past decade designed to discourage undocumented migrants from entering the country.

Rather than significantly reducing illegal crossings, the initiatives have instead driven migrants into remote and dangerous areas of the southwest region of the United States, leading to an alarming number of migrant deaths.

We urge both the U.S. and Mexican enforcement authorities to abandon the type of strategies that give rise to migrant smuggling operations and migrant deaths.

The U.S. Border Patrol has recently launched a border safety initiative to prevent migrant deaths. We ask the Border Patrol to redouble their efforts

in this area and to work more closely with community groups to identify and rescue migrants in distress.

Similarly, we call upon both nations to undertake joint efforts to halt the scourge of trafficking in human persons, both within our hemisphere and internationally.

As bishops we have decided, in the words of Pope John Paul II, to “put out into the deep” in search of common initiatives that will promote solidarity between our countries, particularly among the Catholics of both countries.

We recognize the phenomenon of migration as an authentic sign of the times. We see it in both our countries through the suffering of those who have been forced to become migrants for many reasons. To such a sign we must respond in common and creative ways so that we may strengthen the faith, hope, and charity of migrants and all the People of God.

The Church must, therefore, welcome all persons regardless of race, culture, language, and nation with joy, charity, and hope. It must do so with special care for those who find themselves—regardless of motive—in situations of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion. ■

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