

Migrant and Refugee Children

"Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me" (Mk 9:37).

The Gospel calls us to help the most vulnerable people in our midst. Children are perhaps the most vulnerable of all. Dependent on others for food, shelter, and guidance, children often suffer the most in times of trial and difficulty. In the midst of persecution, war, and other calamities, when families are forced to flee their homelands in search of safer places, parents and children can easily become separated, leaving the children alone. At other times, unaccompanied and undocumented children and teenagers try to make their way to the United States, either with the hope of reuniting with family already here or in search of work to help support their families back home. In both cases, alone and without a parent or guardian to watch over them, migrant and refugee minors are left vulnerable to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and exploitation.

Who Are Unaccompanied Refugee Minors?

Refugees are a particularly vulnerable group of people who are fleeing their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on nationality, race, religious or political beliefs, or membership in a particular group. Refugee children are especially vulnerable. Sadder still, thousands of these children across the world have no families to turn to for help or protection. Some are fortunate enough to escape refugee situations and to be resettled into countries like the United States. The Refugee Act of 1980 provided a special designation, as well as assistance programs, for these unaccompanied refugee minors—refugee children in the United States who are younger than eighteen years of age and who do not have a parent or guardian who is able or willing to care for them.

What Is the Church Doing to Help?

The Catholic bishops of the United States, through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) and its diocesan network, have provided assistance and care to unaccompanied refugee minors for many years. This work fulfills an important part of the Church's mandate to secure and protect the life and dignity of the human person. For more than two decades, in coordination with the United States Refugee Program, the Catholic Church has helped to resettle and provide support to these children. The services include English-language courses, other education, job training, and mental health services. Since 1980, many thousands of children from dozens of countries have been cared for by foster care programs. Through the refugee foster care program, these children have been given an opportunity to start a new life in the United States.



renewing HOPE,
seeking JUSTICE

Who Are Unaccompanied and Undocumented Minors?

Unaccompanied and undocumented children seek to enter the United States every day. These children are alone—separated from family who remain in their country of origin, who are living in the United States, or who are no longer alive. Some children have lost their families to civil conflict, acts of violence, natural disasters, or natural causes. Others are forced to flee their home countries to escape poverty, violence, abuse, or exploitation. Still others make the journey with the hope of reuniting with their parents or siblings. Vulnerable and scared, these children who migrate in search of a safe haven or to reunite with family living in the United States are often easy prey for smugglers, traffickers, or robbers.

Recognizing the dangers these children face, Pope Benedict XVI remarked that “these boys and girls often end up on the street abandoned to themselves and prey to unscrupulous exploiters who often transform them into the object of physical, moral and sexual violence.”¹ Sadly, the life of an undocumented and unaccompanied child is filled with peril, as such children are easily exploited by others who have no concern for their well-being. Some of these children end up as victims in the sex trade. Others are forced to work in sweat shops. Still others are pressed into domestic servitude.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 2008 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/migration/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071018_world-migrants-day_en.html.

What Can I Do?

The Lord Jesus himself was a migrant child, fleeing as he did to Egypt with Mary and Joseph to escape from the evil designs of King Herod. As members of the Catholic Church, we are obligated to reach out and help the most vulnerable among us. Undocumented or unaccompanied refugee minors certainly meet this definition. A specific way to help is by becoming a foster parent, if you live near a refugee foster care program. It is only through the compassion of people like you that these foster care programs can continue to exist and help children in need. These programs seek caring and committed foster parents, and they always welcome inquiries. If you are interested in becoming a foster parent or just want to learn more about the program, please contact the USCCB/MRS Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program at 202-541-3347.

What Is the Church Doing to Help?

Recognizing the dangers that undocumented and unaccompanied minors face, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken steps to address the specific needs of these children. Many unaccompanied minors are detained in federal detention centers throughout the country. In cooperation with the federal government, the bishops have taken measures to ensure that detained children are provided a safe haven and that they receive appropriate child welfare services while in the custody of the U.S. government, as well as support services after reunification with family members. One of the bishops' primary goals is the reunification of children with their parents or rightful guardians. When this is not possible, some unaccompanied minors are placed in specialized foster care programs.

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