



Migration and our Catholic Response

What is the Issue?

Migration has been a consistent aspect of the human experience throughout history and continues to be a defining characteristic of the United States. Migration is closely linked to economic, social and political realities that influence the decision, and often the necessity, for people to migrate. Currently close to 200 million people live outside their country of birth worldwide. Although this number includes refugees, asylum seekers and others, economic migrants make up the largest proportion. These economic migrants—who could often be described as economically displaced people—have few other options to remain in their country and meet the basic needs of their families.

The expansion of economic globalization, characterized by interdependent economic and social relations, has created levels of wealth barely imagined in the past. However, the benefits have not been evenly distributed and often have deepened the inequalities between and within countries. (For more information about this issue see the international trade issue area of usccb.org/globalpoverty.) In the context of globalization, goods and capital cross borders with increasing ease, but workers are unable to move to where job opportunities exist or to where their jobs may have moved.¹ At the same time, many wealthier countries are experiencing declining birth rates and aging populations that would lead to a labor shortage were it not for immigrant workers.

Currently, restrictive migration policies throughout the world have resulted in few avenues for legal or safe migration. Instead, many migrants experience abuse and exploitation as they travel in dangerous conditions. They are subjected to extortion and physical and sexual violence, and die of exposure, dehydration or drowning. Many migrants have little access to protection, legal representation or basic services.

U.S. immigration laws and policies have become increasingly restrictive and even harmful to some immigrants and asylum seekers. Between 10 and 12 million people in the U.S. live on the margins of our society for lack of proper immigration documentation. Immigrants who are legal permanent residents in the U.S. who want to reunite with close family members must often wait 10 or more years for visas for their relatives. Enforcement strategies employed along our southern border have resulted in thousands of deaths. Asylum seekers who flee persecution in their home countries and look for safe haven in the U.S. instead find themselves detained as criminals.

How Does Migration Affect Real People?

Like most men in Laguna Patzijon, Guatemala, Anselmo Ramundo (seen here with his son) migrates to the Guatemalan coast every year to find work cutting sugar cane. He works 12 hours a day, seven days a week and earns about \$4 a day. Many of today's economic migrants such as Anselmo often have no other option but to migrate to other areas of their country and even outside of their country so that they can meet the basic needs of their families. Leaving their families behind for many months at a time is hard, and migrants often face serious dangers during their travels.



Photo by David Snyder for CRS. Anselmo Ramundo (with his son).

Anselmo and his fellow farmers in Laguna Patzijon insist, however, that if they simply had irrigation systems in their community they would be able to diversify their crops, which in turn would lessen their need to migrate annually after harvesting the maize and beans that they plant.

¹ According to the former Director of International Labor Organization, Juan Somalia: "If you look at Globalization from the point of view of people's concerns, its single biggest failure is its inability to create jobs where people live."



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Why Should People of Faith Care?

The Catholic Church's teaching on migration is based on a commitment to promote and defend human dignity with particular attention to the most vulnerable. The Church outlines a number of principles on migration that are connected to poverty, including:²

People have the right to find opportunities within their own homeland: they have the “right not to migrate.” This principle emphasizes that all people have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and not be compelled to migrate.

People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families where conditions do not exist to meet their basic needs. Our current immigration system often separates families for years as migrants take great risks to find work and send resources to families left behind. Even when a family member is able to establish U.S. legal permanent residency and attempts to reunite with loved ones, visa delays often keep husbands and wives, parents and children apart for years. The number of unaccompanied minors attempting to migrate to the U.S. to reunite with family has risen in recent years. Minors are particularly vulnerable: there are increasing reports of children disappearing in transit and, in some cases, becoming victims of human trafficking.

Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. The Church does not promote an “open border” immigration policy, but rather policies that ensure safe, legal, and orderly immigration and address the needs of both migrant families and impacted communities.

The human dignity and human rights of all migrants should be respected. Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity and human rights that should be respected. Enforcement and border control practices should respect the human dignity of migrants.



Photo by David Snyder for CRS

Sri Lankan women who came to Lebanon as domestic workers were forced to move again when war broke out in 2006.

What Response is Needed?

The Church works to reduce the need for people to migrate and protect those people who have little choice but to do so. The long-term goal is equitable development for all peoples, so that migration is a choice rather than a necessity. Based on the experience of Catholic organizations in many countries, the flow of migrants will continue as long as social factors compel people to leave their homes in search of work or safety. We must both address the factors that create global poverty and marginalization and work for comprehensive migration reform.

Comprehensive migration reform includes addressing the factors driving migration and reforming current U.S. migration policy that is outdated and ill-equipped to serve the needs of both immigrants and the nation. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic organizations nationwide have formed the Catholic Campaign for Comprehensive Migration Reform (www.justiceforimmigrants.org) that supports the following:

- 1) A path to citizenship for the 11-12 million undocumented people in the U.S.;
- 2) Reform of our employment-based immigration system, so that migrant workers can enter the United States and work in a safe, regulated, and humane manner;
- 3) Reform of the family-based immigration system, so that waiting times to reunite families are significantly reduced;
- 4) Restoration of due process protections for immigrants; and
- 5) Policies to address the root causes of migration, such as economic development in poor countries.

²The CST principles referenced pertain to all migrants. For brevity additional principles on refugees and asylum seekers were not included.

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