



Economic Instability and the Migrant Family

“The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner.”¹

—Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth*
(*Caritas in Veritate*), no. 32

Systemic poverty, economic instability, and a lack of viable employment are fundamental, root causes of unregulated migration. According to the International Labor Organization, close to 550 million workers around the world live on less than one U.S. dollar a day, while almost half of the world's 2.8 billion workers earn less than two dollars daily.² Endemic poverty affects many in our own hemisphere. In the past fifteen years Mexico has lost more than two million agricultural jobs, and in the last twenty years the Mexican minimum wage has decreased by 70 percent in real terms.³ The CIA reports that 84 percent of Haitians live under the poverty line, with 54 percent in abject poverty.⁴ Such conditions stifle human flourishing by dramatically limiting opportunity and creating an environment in which the God-given gifts that we are all called to actualize can only atrophy. It should come as little surprise that in such circumstances people often seek a better life elsewhere, through both legal and illegal means.

Given the economic inequalities that separate the developed from the developing worlds and the important role that these differences play in migration patterns, the Catholic bishops have repeatedly stressed that an open-door immigration policy is not a solution to the problem of illegal immigration. International economic development is a crucial component

in the management of migration patterns, illegal or otherwise. The bishops of the United States, in their pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer*, called on the United States to work in solidarity with the international community to help raise the standard of living, uphold human rights, and implement complementary political institutions in the underdeveloped world so that people can have the chance to prosper in their homelands, rather than having to migrate to find opportunities elsewhere.⁵

While the U.S. government works with international entities to address the root causes of migration, other steps can be taken domestically to help regulate illegal immigration. For example, Congress can develop policies that provide legal avenues of entry for low-skilled workers that better match fluctuations in the marketplace. When the economy is strong, the availability of jobs acts as a magnet to immigrants who want to come and work but are unable to do so legally, given the lack of visas available. Only 5,000 green cards per year are available for unskilled and low-skilled workers—such as hotel employees, landscapers, and construction workers—to come to the United States. Increasing the number of visas will create job-related opportunities and legal channels through which migration can occur.

Economics, Migration, and the Family

The lack of economic opportunities confronting large segments of Latin America and the Caribbean places significant strain on families, often presenting them with a troubling choice. Some choose to stay together and remain in their home country, even amidst difficult conditions in which economic stresses wear on familial attachments and communal stability. Others choose to leave their family and head northward, with the hope of making it to the United States, finding worthwhile employment, and sending money home. The lure of a better life in the United States and in other developed countries promises opportunities, but it also carries its own dangers.

In particular, women and children who migrate run the risk of being caught in the web of human trafficking, where they are compelled into a life of sexual slavery and forced labor. Others make it safely to their appointed destination, only to find themselves cut off from family and friends and displaced thousands of miles from home. The decision of whether to head elsewhere for work or stay at home with one's family has the unfortunate tendency to pit the value of family against the value of work. No family, no father and no mother, should be forced to choose between economic stability and being together.

Given the importance of family life, the bishops believe that reunification should continue to be a central part of U.S. immigration policy. Too often it takes years before even legal residents can be reunited on American soil with family members who still live overseas. As of October 9, 2009, for example, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services was still processing family-related visa applications that had been filed as long ago as January 1987. Lawful permanent residents, who have already obtained green cards and are currently living in the United States legally, can expect to wait between four and eighteen years to bring their immediate family members to the United States, depending on the country of origin listed on their application.

“The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself.”⁶

—Pope John Paul II, *On the Family* (*Familiaris Consortio*), no. 42

What Can You Do?

The Catholic bishops of the United States recognize that the solution to global poverty and the problems associated with it will not follow from government action alone. It is the duty of all Catholics to do what they can, in both big and small ways, to address this problem. With this in mind, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in coordination with Catholic Relief Services, has created a resource that encourages groups and organizations to become a star on the Global Solidarity Map. This resource provides an opportunity for your group to highlight the ways in which you are praying, learning, sharing, and acting to confront global poverty and, in the process, provide inspiration for others to take action as well.



To see the Global Solidarity Map and get involved, please visit www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/ccgp_map.shtml.



To learn more about the root causes of immigration, please visit our website and watch the September 9, 2009, webcast titled “International Migration: Root Causes and Solutions” at www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/ccgp_webinars.shtml.

1 See Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth* (*Caritas in Veritate*) (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2009).

2 International Labor Organization.

3 USCCB, Catholics Confront Global Poverty, “Migration and Our Catholic Response,” www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/ccgp_migration.shtml#fn4.

4 Central Intelligence Agency, “Haiti,” *The World Factbook*, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html.

5 USCCB and Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), nos. 38, 59-62.

6 See Pope John Paul II, *On the Family* (*Familiaris Consortio*) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982).

