

Transcript of
Catholic Current: Refugee Resettlement and the Catholic Church

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
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Maura Moser: Hello and welcome to Catholic Current, where we discuss our faith and give you an update on events affecting the Church in the United States. From Washington, D.C., I'm Maura Moser. Today we are having a conversation with Bill Canny, executive director of USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services. Thank you for joining us, Bill. I know this has been a busy week for you.

Bill Canny: Maura, it's a pleasure to be with you.

Maura Moser: Let's just get right into it. Earlier this week on Monday, the USCCB issued a press release defending its work as part of the Refugee Admissions program. What prompted that?

Bill Canny: Well, there were some comments made by a high government official that mischaracterized the work of the Catholic Conference, but also the Catholic Charities around the country. We clarified that we *do* take federal money to resettle refugees, and we clarified that these are not illegal immigrants. And let me just tell you a little bit about this program, if I may. The refugee resettlement program has been around since 1980. The Church has been resettling refugees for decades before that, but it was codified in 1980. Ten agencies participate—the majority faith based—and the Catholics participate through USCCB and primarily Catholic Charities. Each year, on average, about 85,000 refugees come into the United States from overseas. The definition of a refugee is someone who has left their country due to persecution in some form, is in another country, and is therefore declared a refugee by the fact that they cross their border.

Maura Moser: Who makes that declaration?

Bill Canny: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees makes the declaration. At that point, there's a pool of a couple million refugees

right now in the middle of a couple hundred million displaced people. A couple million refugees who are *eligible for refugee resettlement*, I should say. The United States government, through some organizations overseas contracted by the government...

Maura Moser: This is the Department of State?

Bill Canny (nods): The Department of State interviews individual refugees and families in six different locations across the globe, and they choose refugees who have a credible case of persecution to come to the United States in a lawful program. This is a lawful pathway to resettle in the United States and become eventually U.S. citizens. We participate in the program by getting allocated a certain number of refugees and going to the airport and picking them up with our Catholic Charities partners, taking them to housing (temporary), getting them food, shelter, health care, helping the kids get into school, sometimes helping them to learn English if they don't have it, and basically integrating them—or beginning the process—for three months. This is the refugee admissions program, as it has been since 1980. It's a highly regulated, codified program monitored by the State Department. And as I mentioned, carried out by ten national agencies and about 65 Catholic Charities across the country.

Maura Moser: It sounds like a lot of work. The vetting, the transportation, setting up the housing, the education... That's a lot of moving pieces.

Bill Canny: It's an incredible effort. And again, highly codified, monitored by the government. We at the Catholic Conference have a role in getting the money from the government and passing it to the Catholic Charities, who are actually doing this resettlement in communities in cities across the country. These Catholic Charities have a number of other programs that they do, but this is important for participating in the United States government and people's humanitarian program to help refugees who have no place to go in countries overseas. Again, these refugees are eligible for resettlement. They can't go home, it's been determined. Nor can they stay where they are. So, the United Nations and governments like ours take a couple hundred thousand overall each year. Not a big number, Maura. Again, the average into the United States over these years is 85,000 or 90,000 a year into our vast country to provide them safety and a new life.

Maura Moser: What kind of places are the refugees coming from in this day and age?

Bill Canny: Well, certainly Afghanistan, Sudan, the Congo, Burma... Places that have had oftentimes war and instability. Coming to this country to, as I mentioned, resettle.

Maura Moser: So the refugees come into the United States. Are they Catholic? Is that why we're involved this work?

Bill Canny: No. In this program—very clearly—all the agencies, faith based or not, take whatever refugee is allocated through a process overseen by the US government, the State Department, regardless of religion.

Maura Moser: So, we're not doing it because they're Catholic?

Bill Canny: No, we're doing it because *we're* Catholic.

Maura Moser: So, we have a program known as POWIR. Could you talk a little bit about what that program does?

Bill Canny: Sure. POWIR is a program to help parishes mobilize volunteers to work with refugees. And we've been conducting this program for a number of years. And essentially, a Catholic Charities will mobilize groups of refugees—excuse me, volunteers—to help refugee families as they've arrived. They may teach them English. They may drive them to a medical appointment. They may help them navigate the bus system. There are a variety of tasks. Everything is new. They're really strangers in a strange land. And these volunteers help welcome these strangers in our land.

Maura Moser: I was at the library not too long ago, and I saw an Afghan family that a volunteer was teaching how to use the library and showing the children how to take out books and things like that. It's all new.

Bill Canny: Very new.

Maura Moser: And in the statement that the USCCB issued on January 26th, the work is described as a “work of mercy.” Could you talk a little bit about that?

Bill Canny: Well, as you know, our faith is built on the love of Christ and the human dignity of every individual. And the belief that we're all made in the image and likeness of God. So, helping refugees and forced migrants is an extension of the love of our neighbor and the imperative to welcome the stranger.

Maura Moser: So, the Catholic Charities network provides services, supports these refugees as they integrate. What happens then? Do they kind of fall into another social safety net? How do they get along?

Bill Canny: One of the key elements of the program is to help them find work. Every Catholic Charities agency has a small team that's in touch with businesses locally, that place refugees into those businesses—not as a humanitarian gesture, so to speak. These businesses need workers. And these refugees come, they're eager to work—as we know from our experience extending to migrants, also. These refugees come eager to work, and about 75 percent within three months have a job, Maura. And collectively, as was recently shown in a study by Health and Human Services, they contribute billions of dollars to our economy, to our revenues and taxes, and obviously make great contributions to our communities, as again we all know.

Maura Moser: And they're extremely grateful. You know, as you mentioned, it's a small number relative to the number of refugees that are abroad. But those who do come here are incredibly grateful and patriotic.

Bill Canny: Absolutely. I mean, we expect them—as we do any migrant into our country—to exercise certain responsibilities, to certainly obey the laws, and to make contributions to our societies and our communities. Refugees particularly take that very seriously.

Maura Moser: Now, we know that the refugee admission program is kind of up in the air at the moment. What happened during the last Trump

administration, and how is it different or similar to what we're experiencing today?

Bill Canny: Well, you may remember the last Trump administration paused the program, essentially with the underlying notion that it was not secure, that these refugees were not sufficiently vetted. A subsequent study found that they are perhaps the most vetted group of people that come into our country. They are—as they're waiting overseas to be considered to be a refugee, or when they're chosen—they're run through about three different databases related to security. They're interviewed by staff of the organizations contracted by the government after, of course, the United Nations interviews them. And then finally, a government official goes over to those places and interviews these refugees, making sure the story is consistent throughout. And again, as I mentioned, we follow up with a triple database (if you will) vetting of these refugees—we believe the most vetted individuals that come into the country.

Maura Moser: That must take a very long time.

Bill Canny: It does. They wait. They can wait a couple of years, even after being chosen to go through that process. So, it does take a long time. Many of these people, of course, are in refugee camps or situations for, you know, ten, fifteen years before they get an opportunity to go to another country like the United States.

Maura Moser: Wow. So last time the Trump administration paused the program. What's happening today?

Bill Canny: So last time they paused the program, and then they reduced it considerably. During the four years of the program, it was reduced quite a bit, letting in (in the final year of the administration) a few thousand refugees. This time, they've also essentially paused the program by declaring no refugees can come into the country. So, it's similar to last time, with I think a different reasoning. I believe the reasoning, you know, was to *review*. It's a 90-day review with the pause that bringing them in [refugees] is consistent with the new foreign policies of our government. So, it's a pause, again with a 90-day review. However, in the meantime, they just sent out to USAID, which is part of State

Department, sort of a foreign policy directive to stop work all over the world, including here in this program. Most of the stop work is outside of the United States. Unfortunately, we're caught up in that. And the stop work order, which basically said to cease activities, has put us into a conundrum and a moral dilemma. We have refugees who have been here for the last three months or less. And we have said, "We will provide you the services (that I mentioned earlier)."

Maura Moser: Right. The housing, the job training, all of that.

Bill Canny: That's correct. Food, housing, medical care, job training. And the stop work order—while a bit confusing (and we're working through it)—provides us a dilemma. We feel we have a responsibility to these refugees who are already in the country.

Maura Moser: There's nowhere else for them to go.

Bill Canny: There is no place for them to go. They are already in communities around the country under the care of the Catholic Charities organizations. So, we've gone back to the government and said, "We don't think that what you've told us to do is correct." And we're asking them now to reconsider this particular stop work order for these refugees and refugee families who are already in the country.

Maura Moser: I know the situation is changing, you know, day by day as we're trying to get a greater understanding. But as of right now, if you are a refugee being served by Catholic Charities in the United States, what is happening? Are you still receiving the services that we had promised to provide?

Bill Canny: This stop work order came last Friday. We had a meeting on Monday with our affiliate agencies, our partners across the country. And our guidance is to continue at this point. We did not feel we could stop these activities. We know it's not *morally* correct. And we're not sure that it's actually *legally* correct, what the government has done. We've written back and told them we think the interpretation of the stop work order is for us to continue these essential services and to meet these essential needs for these refugees that are in the country. We think that the State

Department is considering the interpretation that we have of the stop work order.

Maura Moser: And the USCCB has a long history, as you said, of working with the US government on this program. Are you hopeful that this situation will be resolved shortly?

Bill Canny: So, this has been since 1980, that we've been working with the United States government in this program. We don't know. I mean, as you know, these orders are coming out of the White House. These are not your sort of normal State Department partners that we've had historically, that are giving us these orders. These are new directives from a new administration. So, we don't know exactly what will happen. What we do hope is that the government will say, yes, you can continue these essential services as we see them and complete the services to these refugees who are already in the country.

Maura Moser: All right. Anything else you'd like to add, Bill, before we conclude today?

Bill Canny: No. Thank you very much for having me.

Maura Moser: Thank you very much, Bill. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Catholic Current. You can find out more about the USCCB work with refugees at USCCB.org. I'm Maura Moser. See you next time.

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