

What does the Catholic Church teach about **IMMIGRATION?**

Frequently Asked Questions & Answers

Immigration can be seen as a divisive political issue for many reasons, such as the lack of comprehensive immigration reform and the dire situation at the border. *Catholic social teaching offers fundamental principles that can guide our approach to immigration.* This document offers an overview of these principles and addresses FAQs about the Church's stance on immigration.

1. What does the Catholic Church teach about **“open borders” & border security?**

Catholic social teaching recognizes that nations have a fundamental right to control their border. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially in regard to the immigrants’ duties toward their country of adoption” (paragraph 2241).

A nation’s right to control their border is not without limits. It must be balanced with the corresponding duty to welcome migrants, and provide just and lawful immigration processes. This corresponding duty to welcome migrants is rooted in the fundamental principle of immigration that “persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families” (*Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, paragraph 33).

Importantly, “[t]he local people, moreover, especially public authorities, should all treat [immigrants] not as mere tools of production but as persons, and must help them to arrange for their families to live with them and to provide themselves with decent living quarters” (*Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church*, paragraph 66).



2. What does Catholicism teach about **undocumented & illegal immigration?**

The Church upholds the rule of law, and encourages migrants to utilize legal pathways for migration. Persons should migrate to support themselves and their families, and are discouraged to migrate for purely personal motives that are inconsistent with the common good. Migrants, regardless of legal status, “are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws, and to assist in carrying civic burdens” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2241).

It must also be remembered that at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fundamental reality that each person is made in the image and likeness of God. Each person has an inestimable and invaluable dignity. This is true whether a person has legal status or not.

(2 cont.) As Pope Saint John Paul II stated: “His irregular legal status cannot allow the migrant to lose his dignity, since he is endowed with inalienable rights, which can never be violated nor ignored. Illegal immigration should be prevented, but it is also essential to combat vigorously the criminal activities which exploit illegal immigrants. The most appropriate choice, which will yield consistent and long-lasting results, is that of international cooperation which aims to foster political stability and to eliminate underdevelopment” (Annual Message for World Migration Day 1996, paragraph 2). “This entails,” as Pope Francis has noted, “creating in countries of origin the conditions needed for a dignified life” (*Fratelli tutti*, paragraph 129).



3. What does Catholicism teach about migrants fleeing persecution, war, natural disaster, or a humanitarian crisis?

The Catholic Church teaches that refugees and asylum seekers—forced migrants—find themselves in a unique situation, which makes it difficult or impossible for them to pursue a visa or some other advanced migrant benefit because of their life-threatening situation or other serious threat. Those in such circumstances deserve the opportunity to seek “liberty and the opportunity to achieve a full life” (*Strangers No More*, paragraph 15). Rather than using regular means of migration, because of their dire circumstances, these persons must be afforded the ability to migrate through other lawful, but irregular means of migration. This includes the right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims considered by a competent legal authority.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON IMMIGRATION

I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland. All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.

II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

V. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected. Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.

The Church recognizes the right of a sovereign state to control its borders in furtherance of the common good. It also recognizes the right of human persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given rights. These teachings complement each other. While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible.

4. Why do **Catholic organizations serve migrants**, at the border or elsewhere, regardless of their legal status?

The Catholic Church's charitable work is united to the saving love and mission of Jesus Christ. As Saint Paul states: "The love of Christ compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14). The Church's mission is the reunification of the people of God to the love of God. This mission no longer sees "Jew or Greek" or regard people "according to the flesh". The Church sees in the migrant, as she sees in all people, the dignity of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God. This charity is a sign of the living mercy of Jesus Christ who seeks to forgive us all of our trespasses. As the U.S. Bishops stated in *Welcoming the Strangers Among Us*, the "Church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education, and social services, no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country, and it works for the respect of the human dignity of all, especially those who find themselves in desperate circumstances."

In addition, the U.S. and Mexico Bishops wrote in *Strangers No Longer* that the Church stands in solidarity with the "religious and social service providers who, without violating civil law, attempt to respond to the migrant knocking at the door" (paragraph 4). This is consistent with the words of Pope Saint John Paul II, who taught that the Church "asks herself how to meet the need [of migrants], while respecting the law" (Annual Message for World Migration Day, paragraph 3). This includes serving "those persons who are not allowed to remain in a national territory."



5. What types of **charitable services** does the Catholic Church provide to migrants?

There are numerous organizations and apostolates at the national, diocesan, and local parish level that provide charitable services to migrants. The types of services these organizations provide may vary depending on their particular mission and the needs they see within their community. Services at the border might include meeting basic needs, such as providing food, clean clothes, a shower, medical attention, or temporary shelter for newly arrived migrants. It could also include providing advice on the steps necessary to reunite with family or find the location of their immigration proceedings. In other areas of the country, services might include those already listed in addition to resettlement and integration services, finding lawful employment, enrolling children in school, learning English, adapting to their new communities, providing affordable legal immigration services, or assisting with the naturalization process to become a U.S. citizen. Clergy and parishes across the country seek to provide pastoral services, especially the administration of the Sacraments, to provide the spiritual graces that God desires for all people.



6. What is the Catholic Church currently doing to advocate for **comprehensive immigration reform**?

The U.S. Bishops have been actively engaged in immigration reform for decades. Unfortunately, comprehensive immigration reform has been lacking in our country. This has led to an immigration law crisis that has led to shortcomings both for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who desire to migrate into the United States. It has also led to problems with border security and enforcement.

In the U.S. Bishops' *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* pastoral letter on immigration, several foundational criteria for comprehensive immigration reform were articulated. These include pathways for earned legalization with an opportunity for eventual citizenship; increased opportunities for foreign-born workers to enter the country safely and securely to legally work in our country; reasonable opportunities for family-based immigration that addresses problems of family breakdown and lack of family reunification; the restoration of due process rights that were previously taken away through the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act; working with domestic and international organizations and other nations to address root causes of migration, to ensure persons are not driven to migrate out of necessity; and provide targeted, proportional, and humane enforcement measures that address true threats to public safety, such as drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and terrorists.

MORE RESOURCES

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 2241 and 2433](#)

[Pope Saint John Paul II, Annual Message for World Migration 1996](#)

[Pope Benedict XVI, Caritatis in Veritate, paragraph 62](#)

[Pope Francis, Dignitatis Infinita, paragraph 40](#)

[USCCB, Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity](#)

[USCCB, Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope](#)

[USCCB, Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration](#)

[Justice for Immigrants](#)

[Catholic Charities of Omaha](#)

[Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska](#)

[St. Mary's Cathedral Immigration Program](#)

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