



Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

Office of the Bishop

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we observe Respect Life Month in our church, I write to you as your shepherd, in communion with my brother bishops in Florida and indeed throughout the United States. Our Baptism unites us to Jesus Christ. Enlightened by His Gospel, we are called to be His Body in the world entrusted with a mission of building a civilization of love and a culture of life.

The church calls us to recommit ourselves to honoring the inherent dignity of every human person, through prayer, education, pastoral care, and advocacy. Our main focus over the past decades has been on opposing abortion and supporting mothers and families, and that effort continues, especially on the local and state-wide levels.

This year, I have reflected with a heavy heart on who is most in need of a message of hope, and believe that it is our immigrant brothers and sisters, so many of whom are suffering under the weight of a broken immigration system. Especially over the last several months, the topic of immigration has dominated the headlines—on television, in newspapers, and across social media. While we rightly affirm that law enforcement has a responsibility to apprehend and detain individuals who commit crimes, we must resist the dangerous narrative that every immigrant is a threat; someone to be parodied, punished, and deported. At the same time, we must also advocate for reform—of immigration law, of due process, and of enforcement practices—so that justice and mercy are upheld together, and families are not needlessly torn apart.

As a pro-life people, can we support the separation of families with mixed immigration status? Can we, in good conscience, endorse policies that deport a working father – knowing the devastating impact it will have on his family – without also acknowledging his contributions to our communities? Can we accept that more children are being pushed into the foster care system because both parents have been deported? Can we continue to ignore the cry of the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers – members of our own parishes – with whom we share the Eucharist every Sunday?

I call on all Catholics in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee to set aside partisan talking points and reflect instead as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Gospel and the Church's rich tradition of social teaching are clear: We are called to care for our neighbor, to shelter the stranger, and to welcome the foreigner; for each of us has been lovingly created in the image and likeness of God. As Pope Francis reminded us, "Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women, and men who share a legitimate desire for being more." We are all brothers and sisters, one family under God, and our faith demands that we move beyond fear and indifference to encounter those on the margins with compassion and mercy. We must be guided by God's directive spoken through Moses — "You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, because you yourselves were once aliens residing in Egypt" (Ex 22:20) — and learn anew as a Catholic community how to welcome Christ in the stranger.

In our efforts to safeguard our borders, we must carefully distinguish between those individuals who intend harm and those who seek hope. Some may argue that we should focus on serving fellow citizens, which we will continue to do. But our faith has always called us to give special care to the poor and vulnerable. Pope Francis proposed that the true *ordo amoris* “order of love” in a society should be modeled on the parable of the Good Samaritan, where love builds “a fraternity open to all, without exception.” Mercy extends our circle of compassion to include those neighbors thrust into our path by “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

I’ve seen our diocese come together in times of great need – for example, in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane - to alleviate the sufferings of those affected. We know how to set aside our own needs to aid those in greater need. Balancing justice with mercy has always been difficult—but Jesus, who equated perfection with mercy (cf. Lk. 6:36), leads us by His example. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: *“The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin.”* — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2241

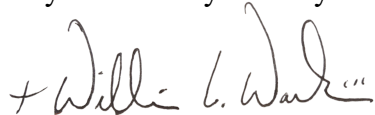
I wish to express my full solidarity with those who have come to this country in search of safety and a better life. In this, I likewise exhort you, the People of God, to employ all of your gifts and influence to join me in bringing about this needed change in our present context. To this end, I invite you to learn more about the Church’s social teaching, its long-standing advocacy for humane immigration reform, the history of immigration in our nation, and what you can do to welcome and accompany our brothers and sisters. Please visit justiceforimmigrants.org for resources on how to pray, offer pastoral care, and join in advocacy efforts.

The immigrant detention center in the Everglades – tragically dubbed “Alligator Alcatraz” – received many of our brothers and sisters, some from our own diocese, who were taken from their workplaces and their families suddenly and without notice. There is talk of opening more such facilities in Florida, possibly one in Panama City in the near future. May we be attentive to the needs of those who are taken there, reminding them that they are loved by God and they are not alone, and may we as Catholics advocate for their dignity, accompany them in their suffering, and work for their just treatment.

The first Bishop of our Diocese, Bishop René H. Gracida, was asked to speak on immigration in March 1977, and he also spoke against unjust separations of families through deportation and the general vilification of immigrants who were simply seeking a better life. We have so much work to do to change the hearts of our elected leaders to advocate for immigration reform.

Our nation has long been a beacon for those fleeing violence, persecution, and extreme poverty. As people of faith, may we choose hope and life – not just for ourselves and our loved ones, but for every child of God.

May God bless you and your families in abundance.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "William L. Wack".

+ Bishop William Wack, CSC
Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee