



Catholic Ministries Serving Migrants and Refugees

The subject of immigration is politically divisive in our nation, and it has often been a point of contention throughout American history. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church has long been at the forefront of efforts to welcome immigrants to the United States and promote their successful integration. Recently, these realities have collided, producing a rise in hostility from a limited number of public officials, media outlets, and private organizations toward the longstanding migration-related ministries of the Church. This resource, while not comprehensive in nature or responsive to every aspect of the immigration debate, seeks to address some common misconceptions and questions regarding the Church's role in serving migrants and refugees, as well as the ways in which Catholic social teaching applies to these issues. It also discusses the work of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in this area.

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1. Does the Catholic Church advocate for “open borders”?

No. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “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 with regard to the

immigrants’ duties toward their country of adoption” (no. 2241). This includes a sovereign country’s right to uphold its borders.

The Church does maintain, however, that this right is not unlimited. It must always be balanced with the duty to welcome newcomers with charity and respect for the human person, as well as the right to life, “upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop” (*Evangelium vitae*, no. 101). In their joint pastoral letter from 2003, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States included a country’s right to control its borders among five principles of migration derived from Catholic social teaching, which also include the right to migrate to sustain one’s life and the lives of one’s family members and the right *not* to migrate, provided that the necessary conditions exist in one’s homeland to achieve a full life.

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2. What does Catholic teaching say about irregular or illegal immigration and undocumented migrants?

Regarding an immigrant’s obligations, the *Catechism* states: “Immigrants 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” (2241). The Catholic Church affirms the rule of law, encourages the use of lawful immigration pathways, and discourages migration simply for the purpose of advancing one’s individual position without regard for the common good in one’s country of origin.

Refugees and asylum seekers—forced migrants—pose a particular challenge for society, however, as their circumstances typically preclude them from pursuing a visa or other advanced benefit on account of life-threatening situations or other serious dangers. It is the element of persecution, threat or danger, or being forcibly displaced that gives rise to a human right to seek protection through irregular means, rather than migrating through ordinary channels (*Strangers No Longer*, no. 31). The Church is also particularly mindful of family separation and the importance of reuniting separated family members, which can be very difficult or even impossible to pursue through the legal pathways available.

Pope Saint John Paul II directly addressed the subject of undocumented migrants in his [message for the 82nd World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#): “In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community. Solidarity means taking responsibility for those in trouble.”

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3. Why do Catholic organizations serve migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border and elsewhere?

Catholics serve migrants and other newcomers in accordance with our sincerely held religious beliefs, abiding by the teachings of Jesus Christ, affirming the inalienable rights and dignity of every person, and providing Christian charity as a visible sign of God's love and mercy to those in need.

In the wake of World War II, Pope Pius XII boldly recognized that the “émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil” (*Exsul Familia*). More recently, Pope Francis has said that chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel, which calls us to “welcome the stranger,” is “a constant admonition to see in the migrant not simply a brother or sister in difficulty, but Christ himself, who knocks at our door. Consequently, even as we work to ensure that in every case migration is the fruit of a free decision, we are called to show maximum respect for the dignity of each migrant; this entails accompanying and managing waves of migration as best we can, constructing bridges and not walls, expanding channels for a safe and regular migration” ([Message of Pope Francis for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#)).

In *Strangers No Longer*, the U.S. and Mexican bishops also aligned themselves with the “religious and social service providers who, without violating civil law, attempt to respond to the migrant knocking at the door” (no. 4). They explicitly encouraged these “signs of hope” by calling on pastors and lay leaders to ensure support for immigrant families, urging communities to offer migrant families “hospitality, not hostility,” along their journey, commending Church communities that establish migrant shelters that provide appropriate pastoral and social services to migrants, and urging local dioceses to sponsor pertinent social services for newcomers, particularly affordable legal services (no. 42).

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4. What services do Catholic organizations provide to migrants and refugees?

The types of services offered vary, and no two Catholic entities are identical in this regard, but the Church regularly and consistently cooperates in the administration of humanitarian aid with local, state, and federal governments, often at their request.

Catholic organizations along the U.S.-Mexico border, for example, may provide a meal, clean clothes, a shower, medical attention, and temporary shelter for newly arrived migrants. Some Catholic organizations also advise recently arrived migrants on the individual steps they can

take to reunite with family or reach the location of their immigration proceedings. Catholic organizations provide resettlement and integration services to newly arrived refugees, helping them to find lawful employment, enroll children in school, learn English, and navigate life in their new communities. Clergy administer the Sacraments to those in immigration detention. Many Catholic organizations across the country provide services to noncitizens who have suffered human trafficking. Catholic organizations also provide affordable immigration legal services, helping qualified individuals to naturalize as U.S. citizens, prepare their cases for immigration court, and more. These programs are designed to assist noncitizens with navigating legal obligations placed upon them by the U.S. immigration system and to promote compliance with applicable laws.

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5. Do Catholic organizations encourage unlawful migration by serving people who enter the United States without authorization? By serving these people, are Catholic organizations contributing to the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border?

There is no evidence or research to support the claim that the humanitarian and religious services provided by Catholic organizations incentivize unlawful migration. Rather, many studies have concluded that a varied and often complex set of push-pull factors typically influence a person's decision to migrate.

The local Church, wherever located along a person's journey, treats newcomers with love and respect, in accordance with God's law (Leviticus 19:34). This treatment is also in accordance with civil law; immigration laws generally do not forbid such treatment, and if they somehow did, they would run afoul of state and federal Religious Freedom Restoration Acts and the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. "As the Church accompanies migrants and refugees on their journey, she seeks to understand the causes of migration, but she also works to overcome its negative effects, and to maximize its positive influence on the communities of origin, transit and destination" ([Message of Pope Francis for the 100th World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#)). Moreover, the Catholic Church does not encourage unnecessary or irregular migration. "Ideally, unnecessary migration ought to be avoided; this entails creating in countries of origin the conditions needed for a dignified life and integral development" ([Fratelli tutti](#), no. 129). In Catholic social teaching, the right to emigrate is generally constrained by the need for "just reasons in favor of it" ([Pacem in terris](#), no. 25). Moreover, the Church regularly uplifts the need to address the root causes of migration and provides recommendations in this regard, in addition to the efforts of Catholic Relief Services, the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, and other Catholic organizations actively working to alleviate adverse conditions in sending countries.

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6. Do Catholic ministries serving newcomers support human trafficking or smuggling? What about programs for unaccompanied children?

No. On the contrary, the Catholic Church has long played a leading role in anti-trafficking efforts and providing, as well as advocating for, expanded services for victims of human trafficking. The USCCB’s programs for unaccompanied migrant children and unaccompanied refugee minors are carried out in strict compliance with applicable laws and policies, prioritizing the best interest and wellbeing of each child.

The USCCB recently endorsed the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022 and advocates annually for an increase in funding for programs that serve U.S.-citizen and foreign-national victims of trafficking. Internationally, the Catholic Church is a recognized and prominent force against human trafficking, with Pope Francis referring to it as “an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ” ([Address to Participants in the International Conference on Combating Human Trafficking](#)). The USCCB has also advocated for increased access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as expanded legal pathways and improved processes for economic- and family-based immigrants, as proven ways to undermine predatory smuggling practices.

Unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, domestic servitude, and other exploitative situations. The Catholic Church considers it a moral obligation to ensure that all children are protected from such harms, consistent with their God-given dignity. Accordingly, the USCCB regularly advocates for increased protections for these children and opposes measures that would reduce or eliminate existing protections. This includes supporting efforts such as the bipartisan Responsibility for Unaccompanied Minors Act, endorsing the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act, and calling for an expansion of post-release services for children placed with sponsors in the United States. Additionally, the Catholic Church has opposed recent and ongoing efforts at the state level to exclude experienced Catholic organizations and others serving these children from state licensure and oversight.

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7. What is the USCCB’s role in assisting migrants and refugees? Does it profit from its programs for migrants and refugees?

Dating back to its origins as the National Catholic War Council, founded in 1917, the USCCB and each of its predecessor organizations have maintained a strong focus on assisting migrants and refugees. As the episcopal conference of the United States, the USCCB works with and supports Catholic dioceses and communities across the country with well-established expertise in “welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating” newcomers ([Message of Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#)), consistent with the Gospel, Catholic social teaching, and applicable laws. As part of its cooperation with the U.S. government over many decades, the USCCB does

receive federal funding in the form of competitive grants but does not profit from its participation in related programs.

The grants received by the USCCB correspond to its role as a national resettlement agency for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), established in 1980, and programs for unaccompanied migrant children and unaccompanied refugee minors, which also began in the 1980s. Through these programs, the USCCB partners with local organizations, mainly Catholic Charities agencies operating under the auspices of their local diocese, to serve refugees, asylees, Afghan and Iraqi special immigrants, Cuban-Haitian entrants, and others authorized by law to receive federally-funded services. The vast majority of funding received by the USCCB for these grants is passed on to those local organizations that directly serve these newcomers. However, the USCCB also requires private funding to operate these programs. In particular, USRAP was designed as a public-private partnership, and it includes components such as the Matching Grant Program, through which federal funding is supplemented with private cash and in-kind contributions of goods and services.

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8. Does the USCCB advocate for increased refugee resettlement because it has a financial interest in resettling refugees?

No. Beyond federal grants, the USCCB is permitted to retain 25% of the travel loans repaid by the refugees it resettles to offset costs associated with participating in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, as well as programs for unaccompanied children and victims of trafficking.

The Catholic Church's solidarity with refugees and financial support for refugee resettlement long precede the creation of USRAP and the existence of travel loans. In 1948, well before USRAP was established and just one year after the National Catholic Resettlement Council (NCRC) was created to coordinate the U.S. Catholic Church's domestic reception and integration efforts for those displaced by World War II, 105 out of 119 Catholic dioceses in the United States at the time had a resettlement director appointed by the local bishop. In the decades following the NCRC's creation, the U.S. Catholic community played a central role in welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Soviet Union, Hungary, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere, many of whom were fleeing communist persecution. These efforts were preceded by generations of Catholics, especially laypersons and women religious, who welcomed newcomers from around the world to the United States, including non-Catholics.

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9. What is the USCCB's position on immigration reform?

The U.S. Catholic bishops are steadfast proponents of federal immigration reform—both a comprehensive reform of U.S. immigration law (e.g., the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013) and incremental reforms to improve specific areas where possible (e.g., the Farm Workforce Modernization Act).

Immigration reform was a major topic of discussion in *Strangers No Longer*, and the U.S. bishops' Justice for Immigrants campaign was specifically created in 2004 to encourage positive immigration reform. The USCCB has consistently supported increased opportunities for legal immigration and the protection for immigrants' due process rights, while opposing an enforcement-only approach to immigration that prioritizes deterrence and unjust penalties.

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10. Does the USCCB oppose all efforts to increase border security?

No. Catholic teaching provides that countries “have the right to take measures against irregular immigration, with due respect for the human rights of all” ([*Welcome Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons: Pastoral Guidelines*](#), no. 57). As part of its mission to promote the common good, the USCCB regularly takes positions on legislative proposals before the U.S. Congress and administrative policies that relate to a wide range of issues, including immigration. However, it maintains no blanket policy of opposing all measures designed to increase border security.

The USCCB carefully weighs and assesses the merits of every bill in relation to Catholic teaching to determine whether it might endorse or oppose that bill. For example, the USCCB has previously supported multiple bipartisan bills with provisions intended to increase border security, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and the Senate-passed Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013. Both of these bills included increased resources for enforcement efforts and new penalties for violations of immigration law, which were balanced with opportunities for long-time residents to regularize their status and new legal immigration pathways.

Most often, the USCCB has opposed migration-related measures because they place a disproportionate emphasis on punitive sanctions, undermine family unity, reduce humanitarian protections, or provide no viable solutions for long-time residents without legal status. The USCCB has also observed increasing efforts recently, at both the federal and state levels, to pass legislation that would penalize or restrict the Church's efforts to serve newcomers, while doing nothing to meaningfully address security or sustainably limit migration.

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