

Pilgrims of Hope: A Pastoral Reflection on Immigration

To the Catholic Faithful in the Province of Iowa and to All Persons of Good Will:

I. Introduction: “Wherever you lodge, I will lodge” (Ruth 1:16)

1. The Catholic Church has always proclaimed the inviolable dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God.¹ Governments do not bestow this dignity, nor does legal status instill it, but it is intrinsic to every human person as a beloved child of the heavenly Father. In every age, the People of God are called to uphold this truth by welcoming the stranger, defending the oppressed, and standing in solidarity with those who are displaced.

2. Immigration is not merely a political or economic issue; it is a deeply moral matter that calls for a response rooted in faith, justice, and mercy. Sacred Scripture consistently reveals God’s care for the immigrant and the refugee: *“You shall not oppress a stranger; you yourselves know how it feels to be a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”* (Exodus 23:9).

3. The right to migrate has long been affirmed in Catholic moral teaching. Pope John XXIII taught that “every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own state. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to migrate to other countries and take up residence there.”²

4. More recently, in an address to world diplomats, Pope Leo XIV enjoins us, “No one is exempted from striving to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly, from the sick to the unemployed, citizens and immigrants alike.” Our present pontiff continues, “All of us, in the course of our lives, can find ourselves healthy or sick, employed or unemployed, living in our native land or in a foreign country, yet our dignity always remains unchanged: it is the dignity of a creature willed and loved by God.”³

5. At a time when political rhetoric often generates division and fear, the Church stands as a beacon of God-given hope. This hope is not mere optimism that ignores where good is absent, but a virtue that sustains us in the work of justice.⁴ Hope resists the tendency to become indifferent to the suffering of migrants; it prevents us from resigning ourselves to the injustices that force them from their homes. Rather, it demands that we respond with courage and solidarity, recognizing that our faith is measured by the way we treat the most vulnerable

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, §25 (1963).

³ Pope Leo XIV, *Audience to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 2025.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Address on Social Justice*, 2023.

among us.⁵ Our hope spurs us to ensure that migrants can share a life worth living, founded on conditions that enable them, with us, to flourish.

6. The social mission of the Church must always begin with persons who are poor, displaced, and otherwise neglected. These individuals are not simply objects of charity but agents of God's presence, who evangelize us through their endurance and fidelity.⁶ We can find inspiration in the Bible's account of Ruth, the daughter-in-law of the widowed Naomi. When Ruth's husband also dies, leaving Naomi bereft of children, Naomi decides to return to her native Judah. In the face of tragic circumstances, Ruth remains loyal to Naomi and emigrates with her in order to accompany and support her. Ruth's pledge, "Wherever you lodge, I will lodge" (Ruth 1:16), reveals God's universal concern for humanity and the blessing God bestows upon those who care for others who are not affiliated with us by blood relation or nationality.

7. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that "love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel."⁷ In welcoming the migrant, we welcome Jesus himself. In defending their dignity, we proclaim the Gospel. And in advocating for justice, we embody the love of Christ, in whom "love and truth meet, justice and peace embrace."⁸ Jesus desires that all his children live in peace and security.

8. As we reflect on the current state of immigration in the United States and beyond, including extant and pending actions by our government, we must ask ourselves: Are we a Church who welcomes or a Church who excludes? Are we led by faith or by fear? Do we see Christ in the migrant, regarding them as a neighbor in the spirit of the Good Samaritan parable, or do we turn away? May this reflection serve as a renewed call to discipleship, inviting us to see Christ in the faces of those whose life path intersects with our own as pilgrims of hope.

II. Immigration Through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching

9. The Church's teaching on migration is not an abstract theory but is rooted in the concrete experiences of migrants and their neighbors. Migration is a moral and political issue that should evoke responses shaped by justice, charity, and respect for human dignity. Pope Benedict XVI exhorts us that "the reality of migration must never become an occasion for conflict, but rather an opportunity for building peace."⁹

10. This conviction has deep roots in the Church's Magisterium—the body of tradition and authoritative teaching conveyed by the Church's pastors, the bishops, throughout the centuries. The Church's teaching on migration is not simply another political viewpoint to be

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §64 (2020).

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §197 (2013).

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §22 (2005).

⁸ See *Psalms* 85:11.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (2011).

weighed against others; it is grounded in Scripture, tradition, and reason. Faithful Catholics are called to engage this teaching and allow it to shape and guide their consciences.

11. Pope Pius XII, in his Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia*, affirms the Church's steadfast commitment to the protection and pastoral care of migrants and refugees. Issued in the aftermath of World War II when mass displacement of people was a pervasive phenomenon, the document frames migration as a moral and ecclesial concern before it is a political one. Pius XII teaches that the Church's ministry to migrants is a long-standing expression of her maternal solicitude, conceiving the migrant and refugee as a brother or sister in Christ to be treated with dignity in love rather than being viewed as an outsider devoid of all dignity and worth.

12. At the core of Catholic Social Teaching is the conviction that every person has a right to live in conditions consistent with his or her human dignity.¹⁰ All persons come from somewhere and seek to live a decent and dignified life where they presently reside. But when their right to exist and other basic human rights are threatened or denied to an extent that they decide to exercise their right to migrate, the Church upholds this latter right. Indeed, the Church teaches, "Among man's rights, we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to provide for himself and his dependents."¹¹ When people are unable to provide for their families due to violence, persecution, or extreme poverty, they have a right to seek a better life elsewhere.¹²

13. At the same time, nations have the right to regulate their borders for the sake of the common good, provided these safeguards are justly enacted with respect for fundamental human rights.¹³ The Church does not argue for unrestricted migration, but she does reject policies that are inhumane, arbitrary, or disproportionately punitive.

14. Overall, weighing these collective and personal goods that are not readily reconciled is a matter for prudential, political discernment and deliberation. St. John Paul II acknowledged this dynamic, noting that immigration policies must ensure both the security of nations and the rights of migrants.¹⁴ However, the security of a nation can never be used as an excuse to violate the dignity and human rights of migrants, including the right to due process under law. Nor should economic expediency be the gauge of persons' worth.

15. The prophetic role of the Church is to proclaim the truth, ensuring that immigration policies reflect proper competence and moral accountability of respective authorities. The Gospel

¹⁰ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §365.

¹¹ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, §106

¹² *Ibid.*, §25.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2241.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, §65.

values of justice and human solidarity are rooted in both faith and reason. The Church is not a partisan institution; she is a mother, called to defend her most vulnerable children. Pope Francis maintains, “It is not just about migrants; it is about all of us, about the present and future of our human family.”¹⁵ This is why Catholic institutions engage in legal aid, refugee resettlement, and advocacy efforts for just and compassionate immigration reform.¹⁶

III. The Immigration Reality in the United States: A Moral and Human Concern

16. We again emphasize: While immigration policies must balance humanitarian concerns with national security and public order, such policies must never ignore or insult the fundamental dignity of the human person. It is inconsistent with the claims of justice to employ enforcement tactics that treat all immigrants, especially hardworking, longstanding, and peaceful members of our communities, in the same manner as violent criminals. Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration, has expressed deep concern over rhetoric that dehumanizes migrants, stating that “the use of sweeping generalizations to denigrate any group, such as describing all undocumented immigrants as ‘criminals’ or ‘invaders,’ to deprive them of protection under the law, is an affront to God, who has created each of us in his own image.”¹⁷

17. Recent executive orders have heightened concerns about the violation of justice and human dignity in immigration enforcement. Policies that restrict humanitarian protections, deny asylum claims, and expand detention measures disproportionately harm the most vulnerable, including families, children, and trafficking victims. The U.S. bishops have voiced particular concern about the open-ended deployment of military assets to enforce civil immigration laws, the prevention of access to asylum, and about proposals to reinterpret birthright citizenship. With our brother bishops, we caution that these measures undermine the moral fabric of a nation built on principles of justice and human rights.¹⁸

18. The Church recognizes the right of nations to regulate immigration, but this right must always be exercised in accord with the precepts of justice, respect for the rule of law, and prudential restraint. Concomitantly, respect for due process is paramount and must be sustained under all sorts of trying circumstances. Longstanding jurisprudence rooted in the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution makes clear that due process is owed to all persons within the country, not just to citizens.

19. More fundamentally, the right to due process is grounded in the natural law and is inherent to every human person by virtue of her dignity—it is not merely a privilege granted by civil

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (2019).

¹⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (2003).

¹⁷ Bishop Mark Seitz, *Statement on Immigration Policies*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2025).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

authority. Such a right should never be dismissed for the sake of expediency in pursuit of political objectives. When a society sets aside fundamental rights for some individuals, it risks further erosions, such as the suspension of *habeas corpus*, that would imperil the freedoms of all.

20. When immigration policies fail to reflect these collective principles, they subvert the common good and instead create conditions for greater exploitation, suffering, and disorder. Law must never be misused to advance the predominance of the majority at the expense of the poor, the marginalized, and vulnerable communities. Rather, respect for the common good implies that, given their respective capacities and needs, people participate diversely in the life and activities of any given community, and this mutual participation serves not only individual flourishing but the overall well-being of the entire community.

21. The Iowa Catholic Conference has previously emphasized that immigration policies must reflect our shared moral commitment to human dignity and family unity, prioritizing compassion over exclusion.¹⁹ In that vein, the bishops have affirmed their nonpartisan commitment to work with lawmakers of every stripe to advance just, responsible immigration policies. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has engaged previous and current presidential administrations and Congress to advocate for a system that is both effective and humane, protecting immigrants, refugees, and the poor as part of the Church's broader mission to uphold the dignity of all life.²⁰

22. As Catholics, we must resist narratives that reduce immigrants to political problems or pawns and instead recognize them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our late Holy Father, Pope Francis, cautions against attitudes that, in practice, treat migrants as "less worthy, less important, less human."²¹ The Church's mission is to proclaim the Gospel, defend the dignity of the marginalized and most vulnerable among us, and cooperate with the grace of Jesus Christ to usher in the Kingdom of God while seeking the salvation of souls. In every season of life, the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 remain our polestar: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).

IV. The Church's Call to Action: Living the Faith

23. The Church's response to immigration must go beyond platitudes; it must take concrete form in the way believers advocate, accompany, and serve others. The treatment of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers is not a marginal issue but a gauge of how seriously we take the command to love our neighbor.

¹⁹ Iowa Catholic Conference, *Statement on Migration – Feast of St. Joseph the Worker* (2024).

²⁰ Chieko Noguchi, *Statement on Executive Orders*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2024).

²¹ Pope Francis, *Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (2019).

24. Every Catholic Christian has a moral responsibility to ensure that the personal dignity of migrants is upheld. This responsibility includes personal dispositions rooted in the truth of the Gospel with its call to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. To act in good faith means resisting narratives that dehumanize immigrants and instead recognizing them as neighbors whom God allows to meet us on our life's path. We must guard against political rhetoric that instills fear and division, that skews perceptions to justify violations of fundamental rights.

25. Pope Benedict XVI observes, "In the present social and cultural context, where there is a widespread tendency to relativize truth, practicing charity in truth helps people to understand that adhering to the values of Christianity is not merely useful but essential for building a good society and for true integral human development ."²²

26. Catholics can embrace their mission as disciples of Jesus by learning about Church teaching on immigration, participating in advocacy efforts, and supporting ministries that serve migrants and refugees. First and foremost, prayer must guide our personal and collective responses, asking God for the prudence to enact just policies and the grace to see Jesus in the faces of those seeking a better life.

27. Parishes, schools, and Catholic institutions must be places of welcome and accompaniment for migrants and refugees. This Gospel call includes providing legal aid, pastoral support, and material assistance where possible. Catholic schools and faith formation programs should incorporate education on Catholic Social Teaching regarding immigration, ensuring that young people understand the Church's commitment to justice. Parishes can also foster intercultural dialogue, creating communities where immigrants are not seen as outsiders but as vital members of the Body of Christ.

28. The call to welcome the stranger is not optional—it is at the heart of the Christian life. In every migrant, we encounter Christ himself. The Church's mission is clear: to defend human dignity, advocate for justice, and create a society where all are treated as beloved children of God. The way we treat the immigrant will not only define our nation—it will mark our fidelity to Christ.

V. Mary, Comforter of Migrants:²³ Model of Hope and Hospitality

29. As we commemorate the Queenship of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, we are invited to turn our hearts to the woman whose life manifests profound openness to God and gracious solidarity with the vulnerable. Mary experienced firsthand the harsh reality of forced migration when she and Joseph fled to Egypt with the infant Jesus, seeking refuge from persecution (Matthew 2:13-15). Their journey reflects the painful experiences of countless migrants and refugees today, who leave their homes under threat, seeking security and peace.

²² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §4 (2009).

²³ "Comfort of Migrants" (*Solacium Migrantium*) was added to the Litany of Loreto by Pope Francis on June 20, 2020. Vatican News.

30. As Queen of Heaven and Earth, Mary stands as a powerful intercessor and advocate for those who journey in hope. She reminds us that every migrant carries within them the image of her Son, deserving of dignity, protection, and hospitality. Just as Mary welcomed and nurtured Jesus with maternal love, the Church is called to imitate her tender care, welcoming migrants and refugees as beloved children of God.

31. Further, Mary's "yes" to God's proposal to be the Mother of his Son inspires our commitment to justice and mercy. In proclaiming that God "has lifted up the lowly" and "filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:46-55), Mary prophetically declares God's preferential option for the poor, the marginalized, and those on the move from locales where they and their families are not safe. Her words compel us to humbly question systems and structures that oppress and exclude, urging us toward faithful responses of solidarity and advocacy.

32. Mary, the Comfort of Migrants and Refugees, stands before us as both guide and model. May her example and intercession awaken in us a deeper commitment to live our faith in action: to welcome generously, to advocate courageously, and to love graciously.

VI. Conclusion: A Jubilee of Hope and a Call to Renewed Commitment

33. As the Church celebrates the Jubilee Year of 2025, we are invited into a profound season of grace, renewal, and commitment to the Gospel. The theme of this Jubilee, "Pilgrims of Hope," reminds us that Christian hope is not passive optimism but an active trust in God's ongoing work of redemption. This theme speaks profoundly to the experience of migrants and refugees who journey in hope seeking security, dignity, and peace.

34. Hope must be more than an idea—it must take form in the structures we build and the actions we take.²⁴ It is not enough to desire justice; we must commit to shaping systems that sustain it. This requires faithful endurance, resisting the temptation to withdraw in discouragement or be embroiled in polarizing social media posts or other messages. Meaningful change comes not through "quick fixes" but through long-term dedication to advocacy, hospitality, and accompaniment. The call to welcome the stranger challenges us to move beyond comfort and convenience, embracing a spirit of encounter that reflects the heart of the Gospel.

35. A more robust sense of hope is seamlessly tied to charity understood as the love of God in himself that carries over into love of neighbor. Carmelite Father Conrad de Meester, in the spirit of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and her "little way" of love, relates these virtues of hope and love: "This hope is no dead-end. It is love on the move; love that is constantly growing and flourishing. **Hope is love in the process of becoming.** Without hope, love would suffocate."²⁵

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §222 (2013).

²⁵ Conrad de Meester: *With Empty Hands: The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*, p 107; emphasis added.

36. The Eucharist, the Sacrament of unity and charity, offers us the ultimate model of Christian hospitality. In the breaking of the bread, we are reminded that we are one Body in Christ, called to reconciliation and to make room at the table for our sisters and brothers, especially the poor and the marginalized. The same Christ who gives himself to us in the Eucharist is present in the immigrant seeking shelter, the refugee longing for peace, and the displaced family searching for security.

37. As we proceed through this Jubilee Year, we are called to embody radical hospitality, seeing Jesus in every person who seeks refuge and stability in hope. Just as the ancient Israelites understood the time of Jubilee as a call for restoration, liberation, and renewal, so, too, does this Jubilee year invite us to renew our commitment to welcoming the stranger, advocating for justice, and working toward a society that reveals the merciful face of Christ. Our response to those seeking refuge and stability in hope is not only a reflection of our nation's founding values, but is primarily a testament to our fidelity to Christ.

38. May this Jubilee Year be a time of conversion and renewed commitment to help "justice and peace embrace," where we open our hearts to encounter Jesus in the migrant and the refugee, advancing a Church and a society rooted in justice, mercy, and love.

August 22, 2025, Memorial of the Queenship of Mary

Most Rev. Thomas Zinkula, Archbishop of Dubuque

Most Rev. William Joensen, Bishop of Des Moines

Most Rev. Dennis Walsh, Bishop of Davenport

Most Rev. John Keehner, Bishop of Sioux City