



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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### Concerns for Immigrants Among Us

As a priest I have spent over thirty-five years serving and getting to know immigrants to our country. They are good people. While, we may not have large numbers of immigrants in West Virginia, those who are here deserve respect and fair treatment. I am concerned that proposals in the West Virginia legislature may harm immigrants and produce effects counter to the intention of those proposals.

The US constitution gives the conduct of foreign affairs and associated matters such as immigration to the federal government. Reforming our struggling immigration system, restoring order at the southern border, overcoming the obstacles facing those seeking asylum or refuge from oppression or starvation, being fair to immigrants brought here as children, and keeping families together when parents lack legal status, but their children born here are citizens – these challenges are for the federal government to solve, not the individual states. As Americans we can both welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for his or her humanity *and* live in a country that takes reasonable steps to secure its borders and enforce its laws for the common good.

Here at home, West Virginians should focus on building compassionate and caring communities that foster the basic conditions necessary to permit human flourishing. I am concerned that reforming our code to impose draconian penalties on local governments and agencies when they fail to prioritize national immigration law over more local concerns may lead to labor exploitation where immigrant communities do not feel able to report unfair pay practices or unsafe working conditions to civil authorities; to human trafficking where people feel trapped and unable to go to the police for help; to unjust discrimination where the penalties for missing someone with a detainer order are so extreme that oppressive measures seem preferable; and to the ability of law enforcement to deal with crime, because immigrants who are witnesses to crimes or themselves victims, may fear cooperation with the police because of the threat of deportation or the deportation of loved ones.

I was ordained a priest in our nation's bicentennial year, 1976. That year, the Smithsonian Institution, our national museum, had an exhibit entitled "A Nation of Nations." The exhibit recognized that, since the beginning, the immigrant experience has always been a major part of the American experience. We are all the descendants of immigrants or are immigrants ourselves. We must work together to reform our immigration laws at the national level, to end human trafficking and drug smuggling, to provide adequate security at our borders and to address the basic needs of food, shelter and safety of those who arrive on our doorstep. Trying locally to root out a few strangers in West Virginia is not a productive, proportionate or humane response to these immigration concerns.

When King Herod threatened the life of Jesus Christ, Mary and Joseph became refugees in Egypt. Today we can remember our refugee Lord in our humane and fair treatment of those strangers among us.

Sincerely in Christ,

+Mark E. Brennan  
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston