



DIocese of WHEELING-CHARLESTON

1311 BYRON STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 230
WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

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Pastoral Letter on Migration

Do you like living in your own country? Most people do. That's where your family and friends are. You speak the language and are accustomed to the climate. Why would you want to leave the place where you "fit?" Yet, some people do decide to leave their home countries. Why would they make such a hard decision? Suppose you are subject to religious, cultural or political persecution. Suppose you are without work or have lost everything in a flood or earthquake and cannot feed your family. Suppose you are a young person with dreams to make more of yourself than the circumstances in your home country will allow. Despite the loss of so much that is familiar and despite the risks migration often entails, you might well choose to leave your country of origin and go elsewhere.

In October I began a series of pastoral letters on the "seamless garment" of life issues, focusing first on the "hem" around that garment: respect for the physical life of the human being, so ruthlessly violated in abortion. In this letter, I focus on another life issue in the seamless garment: migration. It is a life issue because in most cases the physical or moral life of a person or family is at stake and, even when it is not, the individual is motivated to find a more propitious setting in which to flourish. I do not write from an ivory tower. I have known and worked with immigrants for many years.

Immigration has been highly politicized in our country but we Catholics must consider it in the light of our tradition of social justice. Our Church recognizes that people have a right to migrate to save or improve their lives. This is because the earth is not our own creation but God's. He has given us all a fitting place to live. As Scripture says: *The heavens are the Lord's but the earth He has given to mankind* [Psalm 115:16]. People have migrated from time immemorial. All of us in the western hemisphere, including Native Americans, have distant or recent ancestors who came here from other parts of the world. The planet belongs to all of us. We are all neighbors. It's not "us" vs. "them" but "all of us together."

Although belonging to us all, the earth is divided into a system of nation-states, each with a government. Do governments have the right to regulate the borders of their countries? Yes, because they must foster the welfare of their citizens. In the short term a large influx of migrants can put a strain on social services and stir up fear in the native population. I know from talking with Catholic bishops from dioceses along our southern border of the great difficulty they are facing in responding to the large number of migrants entering our country. The federal government should bring order to that situation and keep criminals out.

But it must be recognized that migrants bring benefits to our society. Contrary to anti-immigrant rhetoric, migrants do not usually take away jobs from the native -born. Some of them bring skills that we badly need in medicine, engineering and the sciences. Some are entrepreneurs and open businesses, providing employment to others. Some take jobs no one else wants. Migrants

also add to the cultural wealth of our nation, from inspiring music and art to ethnic cuisine, from the Christmas tree of German immigrants to the pizza of the Italians.

Our Church has benefited for centuries from foreign-born priests and religious who have dedicated their lives to serve our people. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first American citizen to be canonized and the patron saint of immigrants, was a young Italian nun who came here in the late nineteenth century and founded orphanages, hospitals and schools for the poor. Other immigrants, such as St. John Neumann, who began the Catholic parochial school system in Philadelphia, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne who opened schools for girls and the first Catholic school for Native Americans, and St. Damien de Veuster, the servant of the lepers on Molokai Island, have contributed immensely to the good of our country.

Immigrants can bring unforeseen benefits. As an historian, I wonder whether the United States could have defeated both Germany and Japan in the Second World War without the millions of sons, daughters and grandchildren of the Irish, Italian, Polish and other immigrants, and African Americans, who filled the Army and Navy. Their parents and grandparents were rarely wealthy or powerful and they could not have known of the terrible war that would take place in the middle of the twentieth century, but they raised their children to love this country and their children and grandchildren fought to preserve its freedom. Who can know what the specific long-term benefits of today's migration may be?

If Catholic teaching honors the role of a government in securing its borders and fostering the good of its people, it also says that governments should respect the serious reasons why people choose to emigrate from their countries of origin. Wealthier nations should be generous in accommodating refugees and migrants and not just those who have specific skills in short supply among the native-born. In other words, governments should have a larger view of the common good than simply what seems best for their own citizens in the short term.

We who accept the truth of Sacred Scripture have the added motivation of faith to welcome migrants. Moses told the Hebrews: *The Lord your God is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites . . . [who] befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So, you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt* [Deuteronomy 10:18-19]. Remember that Jesus himself was a refugee in Egypt, taken there by Mary and Joseph when they learned that King Herod wanted to kill the child. It should not surprise us that he says in the Gospel for Christ the King Sunday: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* [Matthew 25:35].

If you wonder why I am addressing the issue of migration when there are proportionately fewer immigrants in West Virginia than in surrounding states, it is because some are here already and more will be coming. We have Latino communities and Spanish Masses in Martinsburg, Charles Town, Clarksburg, Morgantown, Beckley, Huntington and Charleston. Many of our priests come from India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Nigeria, Cameroon and other nations; some of our religious sisters are from Zimbabwe and Mexico and other Latin countries. I thank God that our West Virginia Catholics have welcomed and embraced them.

Considering the needs and contributions of migrants, it is distressing that our federal government has not reformed its immigration laws. If you wonder why some people come here without visas, it is because our national government has made it so hard to come here legally. For the

majority of likely immigrants, it takes years, sometimes decades, to get an interview and begin the visa process. Meanwhile, you could be killed for your faith or your political views or your family could starve. People in these situations are desperate and so they leave home and come here – which justice says they have the right to do. On Ellis Island in New York harbor, millions of immigrants passed through its halls. Ninety-eight percent were admitted. Only prostitutes, anarchists and the insane were kept out. Keep out criminals and terrorists who try to enter today but let the decent people in.

As for those migrants who are already here and want to stay, they should have full legal status. Many of those who enjoy the Temporary Protective Status have been here for more than twenty-five years, but Congress will not recognize reality and give them permanent residence. Others, called Dreamers, were brought here as little children. As one of them told me, “I don’t remember the country where I was born. This is my country. I want to live and work here.” We should also reject any form of second-class citizenship. All immigrants should be able to apply for citizenship on an equal basis. I have had the pleasure of witnessing immigrants swear their allegiance to the United States of America, which my father, the grandson of immigrants, fought to defend in World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

It is lamentable that the West Virginia legislature last year passed a law requiring local police to enforce federal immigration laws and imposing penalties on civil jurisdictions that do not do so. Enforcing immigration law is the role of federal officials. Local police should be focusing on maintaining public order and solving actual crimes. All such a law does is to instill fear in a vulnerable group of people who generally cause no trouble. It makes them less likely to report crimes against themselves and to testify as witnesses to crime. How does that help local police fulfill their primary responsibilities? That law should be repealed.

Regardless of the circumstances or conditions of the migrants who arrive here, they are human beings made in God’s image and likeness. They are our brothers and sisters in the human family. They need food, clothing, a place to live and some means to support themselves. Our Church will continue to help them. As men and women of Christian faith, we should understand that in welcoming them, we welcome Christ, the Son of God, the stranger who migrated to earth and assumed a true human nature through which he brought us salvation.

Being both generous and prudent for the long term, our federal and state governments and we Catholics should welcome migrants and lend them a helping hand. They are a blessing to us, not a curse. They will make our nation better than they found it. As Emma Lazarus wrote in a poem inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” That lamp beckons the afflicted and the hopeful to come to the land of the free and the home of the brave. *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* That is the true spirit of America and the spirit of the Gospel. Let us live up to it as Americans and as Catholics.

Sincerely in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston