

January 2025
St. Vincent DePaul and St. Pius V Parishes
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Justice and Immigration

Immigration is one of the most pressing political and moral issues of our time. And it is one of the most confusing and divisive issues as well.

That means it's all the more important to be aware of what the Catholic Church teaches regarding immigration.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the command to treat aliens and immigrants with justice was a basic principle of law:

Exodus 23:9 "You shall not oppress an alien, for you know the heart of an alien, seeing you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:33-34 - "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for them as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt."

Jesus reiterated the command to love and care for the stranger as a criterion of judgment by the Son of Man: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).

Over the past several decades popes and bishops have repeatedly addressed the issue of immigration. Three fundamental principles, derived from Scripture and the natural law, have come to shape the Church's teaching on immigration and the rights of immigrants:

Principle #1: People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.

When crises such as war, natural disaster, social or political unrest, or climate change force people to leave their homeland, they have a right to migrate to a new country to seek safety, security, and a better life. Traditional Christian teaching holds that the earth belongs to God, and that God wills for all people to have what is necessary for life.

This means the native does not have superior rights over the immigrant. The earth is God's gift to all. When people cannot achieve a meaningful life in their own land, they have the right to move and resettle.

Principle #2: A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration.

Ordinarily, people do not leave the security of their own land just to enhance their standard of living. They migrate because the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land. Immigrants often long for the homes they left behind.

While people have the right to move in search of a better life, no country is bound to accept all those who wish to resettle there. No country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its own social and economic life are jeopardized.

At the same time, countries have the obligation to enact and implement immigration policies that respect the rights of both their own people and those who seek to immigrate there.

Americans should also recognize our responsibility to assist other nations as they develop politically, economically, and socially. We should work to make it less necessary for people to have to leave their own land.

Principle #3: A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

A country's immigration laws and policies must be governed by concern for all people, and not merely on its own perceived self-interest. A nation may not simply decide that it wants to provide for its own people and no others. A sincere commitment to the needs of all must be the bottom line.

Moreover, immigration policy ought to take into account values such as the right of families to live together. A just immigration policy will not force married couples or children to live separated from their families for long periods.

Undocumented immigrants present a special concern. Often they are considered criminals since they arrive without legal permission. Undocumented people may be regarded as undeserving of rights or services.

This is not the view of Catholic social teaching. The Church teaches that every person has basic human rights and is entitled to have basic human needs met. Immigration policy that criminalizes the mere attempt to immigrate and imprisons immigrants who have committed no crime is immoral.

Immigration policy that allows people to live here and contribute to society but refuses to offer them the opportunity to achieve legal status does not serve the common good.

Finally, pastoral, educational, medical, and social services provided by the Church are never conditioned on legal status. All persons are invited to participate in our parishes, attend our schools, and receive other services offered by our institutions and programs.