

Migration & Catholic Social Teaching

Key Principles Derived from the Magisterial Teaching of the Catholic Church

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland (i.e., the right not to migrate).
- When the conditions necessary for a dignified life are absent, persons have the natural right to migrate to support themselves and their family.
- More prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome those in search of the security and means of livelihood unavailable in their country of origin.
- Countries have the right to maintain their borders and regulate immigration, consistent with the common good and with respect for the sanctity of human life.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The God-given dignity and rights of undocumented immigrants should be respected.
- Immigrants have a responsibility to respect the country that receives them.

Irregular Migration and Immigration Enforcement

- Pope Francis has [stated](#) that “safe, orderly, regular, and sustainable migration is in the interest of all countries.” At the same time, Catholic teaching [recognizes](#) that it “is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop.” Threats to human life, therefore, may compel irregular migration. Above all, we must reject an oversimplification of the issue that disregards the human lives involved. One of the main differences between immigrating to the United States today and immigrating to the United States 100 years ago is that the process has become much more complicated and limiting, meaning most who immigrated during the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries could not do so today.
- Immigration enforcement should always be targeted, proportionate, and humane. According to its nature (i.e., the crossing of international boundaries) and the U.S. Constitution, it is principally and necessarily the responsibility of the federal government to regulate immigration and provide orderly processes for people seeking to immigrate to the United States. However, national, state, and local governments must work collaboratively with one another and civil society to devise a collective and humane response to migration.



Immigration Reform

- As recognized by the Church for decades, the current immigration system is inadequate to address the needs of American families, employers, and communities, as well as immigrants themselves. Reforms and investments are needed to modernize/increase capacity at ports of entry, increase the number of/access to lawful immigration pathways, and establish earned legalization programs for long-time undocumented residents.
- The situation at the U.S.-Mexico border is unsustainable for migrants and communities alike, but it can and should be addressed without sacrificing longstanding, life-saving humanitarian protections, such as asylum. Ultimately, no sustainable reduction in migration can be achieved without a long-term commitment to addressing its root causes. Looking only at the U.S.-Mexico border or the domestic situation ignores the realities people face in their countries of origin. Heavy-handed enforcement measures will not alleviate forced migration. Much more attention should be given to the myriad causes of increased migration, rather than simply responding to its symptoms. In his most recent encyclical, Pope Leo [emphasized](#) that it is critical to protect “the rightful hopes of those forced to leave by ensuring safe and legal routes, dignified conditions for receiving them, and genuine pathways to integration. On the other hand, it means promoting the right to remain in one’s homeland in peace and security by addressing the root causes that force people to migrate, including those linked to economic injustices and the climate crisis.”

Additional Resources

- [Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2241](#) (USCCB).
- [Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope](#) (USCCB)
- [Q&A on Catholic Ministries Serving Migrants and Refugees](#) (USCCB)
- [Human Trafficking, U.S. Policy, and the Catholic Church](#) (USCCB)
- [Justice for Immigrants](#) (USCCB)
- [Responding to Migrants and Refugees: Twenty Action Points](#) (Holy See)
- [Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking](#) (Holy See)
- [And They Shall Know Us by Our Love](#) (Catholic Charities USA)
- [Modern Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration: Notable Quotes](#) (CLINIC)



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