

## *An Open Letter to the Catholic Community and All People of Good Will in Mid-State Pennsylvania*

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Immigration is a topic that evokes very strong emotions in many people. I write not as an expert on immigration, or from a political perspective, but rather as a fellow citizen and the shepherd of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg which is comprised of fifteen counties here in the mid-State. I am moved to address this topic, especially at this time, because many of those who are entrusted to my pastoral care in our Diocese are frightened about events that are unfolding in our country because of their immigration status. In the midst of all the controversy, I want to share with you what the Catholic Church actually teaches about the topic, which is not always accurately reported in the media. My hope is for us to thoughtfully consider what we can do to balance what is best for the common good of all citizens while showing respect and dignity to immigrants, who are our neighbors as well.

Whenever I visit New York City, I appreciate opportunities to see the Statue of Liberty as it is still a moving experience for me. I reflect on how many of our ancestors, including my own, passed through there on their own journey to a new land of opportunity and freedom. That Statue symbolizes generations of welcoming immigrants to our great Nation, and it has primarily been positive both for us and for them. Central Pennsylvania is home to many migrants who have transitioned well into the work force, our schools, neighborhoods, and places of worship. As Pope Francis stated: "...the encounter with the migrant, as with every brother and sister in need, is also an encounter with Christ. He himself said so. It is he who knocks on our door, hungry, thirsty, an outsider, naked, sick and imprisoned, asking to be met and assisted" (*Homily, Mass with Participants in the "Free from Fear" Meeting*, Sacrofano, 15 February 2019). The final judgment in Matthew 25 leaves no doubt: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (v. 35); and again, "truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (v. 40). Recently, Pope Francis sent a Letter to the United States Bishops concerning migration issues in which he notes: "...the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness" ("Letter" n.4). "This is not a minor issue: an authentic rule of law is verified precisely in the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized. The true common good is promoted when society and government, with creativity and strict respect for the rights of all – as I have affirmed on numerous occasions – welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates the most fragile, unprotected and vulnerable. This does not impede the development of a policy that regulates orderly and legal migration...(Ibid. n.5)"

In recent years, our immigration system has broken down and our southern border is currently a flashpoint. There are many people who think that the Church supports open borders. This is not our official position (Rev. Thomas Betz OFC, *Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples*). Many migrants seek to enter our Country to escape the overwhelming poverty where they

lived, government oppression, and religious persecution. Most are good people seeking a better life to support their families and a place to raise their children in an environment where they can thrive. Regrettably, fear and insecurity are now part of many of these peoples' lives. Pastors, school principals, and those who work with migrants have shared with me how this is true here in our own Commonwealth with the people to whom they minister. Recently I published, "*Setting Captives Free: A Pastoral Letter on Human Trafficking*." In that document, I talk about the challenges that migrants face, particularly exploitation for economic and sexual purposes. I want all to know that I hear their distress and worries about their current situations and their desire to preserve what they have worked so hard to achieve; I pray that you do as well.

The Church also recognizes that there are some who seek entry into our Country for immoral reasons, who perpetrate violent crimes, and from whom our Citizens should be protected (NCCB/USCCB, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, 2000). So, on the one hand, the Church acknowledges that individuals have a right to migrate. On the other hand, the Church recognizes the rights of countries to control their borders and enforce migration policies (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, N.2241). Those rights should balance both the common good and respect the human dignity of each individual because we are all made in God's image and likeness. The Catholic Church is a proponent of comprehensive legal immigration reform that includes pathways to citizenship and keeping families together while still protecting our borders. And so Catholic teaching is not supportive of open border policies yet calls for a commonsense approach where caring for the stranger is balanced with protecting our Country.

I encourage our Catholic faithful to learn more about the challenges immigrants face, to better understand the Church's teachings in this area, and to join with me, along with all people of good will, in advocating for migration policies that respect the dignity and rights of immigrants balanced with the common good of our citizens. We need to help immigrants overcome their anxieties and find their home among us in a way that allows them to be law-abiding citizens. An important part of our Christian tradition is the story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to protect Jesus from the murderous wrath of King Herod. In a word, they became migrants in a foreign land.

Pope Francis has proclaimed 2025 as a **Jubilee Year of Hope**. May we strive to solve our Nation's migration challenges with policies and solutions that balance respecting human dignity with justice for all concerned. May the Holy Family, whose experience in Egypt symbolizes the plight of many migrants, watch over and protect our Nation and all of us.