

U.S. Catholic Bishops: Five Principles to Guide Immigration Policy

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have identified five principles that should act as a guide for policymakers in creating immigration reform legislation. The principles are:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

This principle states that a person has a right not to migrate. In other words, economic, social, and political conditions in their homeland should provide an opportunity for a person to work and support his or her family in dignity and safety. In public policy terms, efforts should be made to address global economic inequities through just trade practices, economic development, and debt relief. Peacemaking efforts should be advanced to end conflict which forces persons to flee their homes.

In the drama of the Family of Nazareth we perceive the sorrowful plight of so many migrants . . . [T]he human person must always be the focal point in the vast field of international migration.

*Pope Benedict XVI
World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2007*



2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

When persons are unable to find work and support themselves and their families, they have a right to migrate to other countries and work. This right is not absolute, as stated by Pope John XXIII, when he said this right to emigrate applies when “there are just reasons for it.” In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty is rampant and political unrest has resulted in wars and persecution, migrants who are forced to leave their homes out of necessity and seek only to survive and support their families must be given special consideration.

3. Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of nations to protect and control their borders in the service of the common good of their citizens. However, this is not an absolute right. Nations also have an obligation to the universal common good, as articulated by Pope John XXII in *Pacem in Terris*, and thus should seek to accommodate migration to the greatest extent possible. Powerful economic nations, such as the United States, have a higher obligation to serve the universal common good, according to Catholic social teachings. In the current global economic environment, in which labor demands in the United States attract foreign laborers, the United States should establish an immigration system that provides legal avenues for persons to enter the nation legally in a safe, orderly, and dignified manner to obtain jobs and reunite with family members.



4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Persons who flee their home countries because they fear persecution should be afforded safe haven and protection in another country. Conflict and political unrest in many parts of the world force persons to leave their homes for fear of death or harm. The United States should employ a refugee and asylum system that protects asylum seekers, refugees, and other forced migrants and offers them a haven from persecution.

5. The human rights and the human dignity of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Persons who enter a nation without proper authorization or who over-stay their visas should be treated with respect and dignity. They should not be detained in deplorable conditions for lengthy periods of time, shackled by their feet and hands, or abused in any manner. They should be afforded due process of the law and, if applicable, allowed to articulate a fear of return to their home before a qualified adjudicator. They should not be blamed for the social ills of a nation.



Displaced children cross a river in Colombia (Refugees International, 2007)

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. How are the following Catholic Social Teaching principles reflected in the U.S. bishops' five principles to guide immigration policy?
 - a) Human dignity
 - b) Common good
 - c) Rights and Responsibilities
 - d) Global solidarity
 - e) Option for the poor

2. How do immigration proposals that you have heard of, both local and national, reflect the bishops' five principles? What would you add to or change about these proposals so that they better reflect CST values?

We Pray for Just Immigration Reform

For immigration policies that respect the rights and dignity of all migrants and their families. . .

God who is just, hear us.

For policies that acknowledge the right of persons to fulfill their basic needs abroad when they cannot be fulfilled at home. . .

God who is just, hear us.

For policies that welcome refugees and asylum seekers who flee danger in their countries. . .

God who is just, hear us.

For immigration reform that respects national sovereignty and security, but not at the expense of the common good. . .

God who is just, hear us.

For reform that seeks to address the causes of the poverty in developing countries from which many migrants flee. . .

God who is just, hear us.

Just God, guide our leaders as they consider immigration reform proposals. Help us to raise our voices for the vulnerable, that just solutions may be found. Amen.

by Jill Rauh, Education for Justice