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## The Colorado Bishops' Statement on Immigration: Welcoming the Stranger, Protecting the Common Good

January 23, 2025

As Catholic Bishops of Colorado, we approach the issue of immigration with prayerful hearts, seeking to guide our communities in a spirit of charity, justice, mercy, and prudence. The call to welcome the stranger is woven into the fabric of our faith, and in standing with immigrants, it is our first concern that they know the love of Jesus Christ and their dignity as human beings. We also recognize the responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of our communities, as well as passing on the teaching of the Church on immigration to those who govern.

### A Call to See Christ in the Stranger

Our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us: *"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me"* (Matthew 25:35). This teaching is not optional but central to our faith. The Gospel compels us to see Christ in those who seek refuge among us — families fleeing violence, individuals searching for safety, and children yearning for hope. Pope Francis echoes this sentiment when he calls us to a "culture of encounter" and reminds us that *"Migrants are not numbers; they are persons who have faces, names, and stories."*<sup>1</sup> Each migrant bears the image of God and deserves our respect, compassion, and support.

Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Labor") developed a presentation of principles of the rights and responsibilities that popes and bishops' conferences have used to create a Catholic theological tradition of three principles for immigration:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families;
- (2) A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration;
- (3) A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

### Individual Right to Migrate to Sustain Life

In *Centesimus Annus* (1991), Pope St. John Paul II echoed *Rerum Novarum* when he argued that the "universal destination of goods" refers to God's creation and God granting mankind's dominion over the earth to provide for all its members *universally*. When individuals are not in systems of government where their dignity is upheld, their rights are violated, and their lives and the lives of their families are at risk. Those individuals have a right to migrate, and the country that accepts them has a moral obligation to provide them with basic human needs, including shelter, food, medicine, and the ability to work. This is part of the universal destination of goods that must be considered in conjunction with the sovereign rights and duties of a nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Meeting with the People of Lesbos and with the Catholic Community: Remembering the Victims of Migration, (16 April 2016), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160416\\_lesvos-cittadinanza.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco_20160416_lesvos-cittadinanza.html).

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Thomas Betz, "Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples," in U.S. Conference of Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples>, (accessed 2 Jan. 2025)

## National Right to Regulate Borders and Control Immigration

The Catholic Church teaches that while individuals and their families have the right to migrate, no country has the duty to receive *so many immigrants* that its social and economic life is jeopardized.<sup>3</sup> The current state of the American immigration system is decidedly “broken.” The process to achieve temporary or permanent legal immigration status in the U.S. takes years and is expensive. This is not conducive for families who need to migrate quickly to sustain their lives or the lives of their families. Immigration data is poorly tracked. The Center for Immigration Studies shows the estimated number of migrants in the U.S. is between 11 million and more than 22 million,<sup>4</sup> and the number of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Citizenship and Immigration Services applications exceeded 8 million in Fall 2022.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2020, the U.S. immigration system has grown more unlawful. The “open border” immigration policy restricted Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) ability to investigate, arrest, or deport spies, terrorists, and felons. This has resulted in the loss of life and situations of unrest and violence, including in Aurora, CO, where 16 recent migrant members of the Venezuelan gang “Tren de Aragua” were taken into custody in December following an armed home invasion and kidnapping.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, more families have been divided, and children have been harmed. Since 2020, the DHS has encountered 515,000 unaccompanied minors at the border — 75 percent of them were reportedly sexually abused by their smugglers. Drug smuggling and human trafficking are on the rise because of the open border policy. From October 2022 to April 2023, Customs and Border Protection seized more than 17,000 pounds of fentanyl at the southern border.<sup>7</sup> An open border is not a just system and does great damage to the dignity of the human person, and most especially to the children and women who are trafficked.

It is critical to ensure that the U.S. immigration system justly protects migrants' rights to sustain their lives and the lives of their families and that the nation protects the safety and well-being of all.

### Justice and Mercy

Every person and nation have a moral obligation to act in accordance with justice and mercy. In times of crisis, justice dictates that the world community has an obligation to provide basic human needs, such as shelter, food, medical services, and the ability to work for those in urgent need. However, even when migration occurs without crisis, a nation’s limits on migration should be based on justice, mercy, and the common good.<sup>8</sup>

Our faith calls us to solidarity with the marginalized, hence we must acknowledge the importance of order and justice in society. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that political authorities have

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<sup>3</sup> Betz, “Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration”

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Fazel Zarandi, Jonathan S. Feinstein, and Edward H. Kaplan, “The Number of Undocumented Immigrants in the United States: Estimates Based on Demographic Modeling with Data from 1990 to 2016,” PLoS ONE, Vol. 13, No. 9 (2018), art. no. 0201193, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0201193&type=printable> (accessed 2 Jan. 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Homeland Security, “Number of Service-wide Forms By Quarter, Form Status, and Processing Time July 1, 2022 - September 30, 2022,” [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Quarterly\\_All\\_Forms\\_FY2022\\_Q4.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Quarterly_All_Forms_FY2022_Q4.pdf) (accessed 2 Jan 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Óscar Contreras, “16 people taken into custody at Edge of Lowry apartments suspected of being Tren de Aragua members, ICE says,” in Denver ch. 7 ABC affiliate, <https://www.denver7.com/news/crime/16-people-taken-into-custody-at-edge-of-lowry-apartments-suspected-of-being-tren-de-aragua-members-ice-says> (accessed 2 Jan. 2025).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “CBP Releases April 2023 Monthly Operational Update,” <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-april-2023-monthly-operational-update> (accessed 2 Jan. 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Betz, “Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration”

the right and duty to regulate migration in a way that serves the common good (CCC 2241). Mass deportation is not the solution to our present situation in the United States, especially when it may separate parents and children.

Thus, immigration policies should balance mercy with justice, ensuring public safety while upholding the dignity of each person. Those who exploit the vulnerable or engage in criminal activity must be held accountable, but we must never allow fear to overshadow our commitment to the Gospel. Enforcement of immigration laws must be humane, prioritizing family unity and avoiding unnecessary harm to those seeking a better life.

### **Our Commitment to Our Migrant Families and Catholic Faithful**

We understand the national conversation regarding mass deportations and raids on migrant families have created genuine fear for many we shepherd in our dioceses. We commit to walking in solidarity with you, our migrant brothers, sisters, and families. We will shepherd you spiritually, gather information and resources, and continue to advocate for your dignity and family unity.

Immigration is not only a policy issue; it is a test of our moral character. As Catholic faithful, we must remember the words of St. Paul: *“You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”* (Ephesians 2:19).

We urge Catholics and all people of goodwill to:

1. Advocate for comprehensive immigration reform — in Colorado and nationally — that respects human dignity, protects the vulnerable, and ensures safety and security for all people, most especially for families. Please sign up for updates from our Catholic Conference on this issue here: <https://cocatholic.org/take-action>
2. Support local initiatives that aid immigrants and refugees in their transition to life in our communities, including the work done through our dioceses and three regional Catholic Charities.
3. Pray for those who are displaced, for their families, for wisdom and courage in our own hearts, and for our local, state, and national leaders to address the broken immigration system that has caused so much hurt and division.

In this moment, we are called to be both bold and balanced — steadfast in our faith, compassionate in our actions and rooted in the virtue of charity. May we, as a community of faith, rise to this challenge with hope, courage, and a commitment to build a society that reflects the love of Christ.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



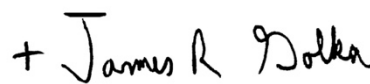
**Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila**  
*Archbishop of Denver*



**Most Reverend Stephen J. Berg**  
*Bishop of Pueblo*



**Most Reverend Jorge H. Rodriguez**  
*Auxiliary Bishop of Denver*



**Most Reverend James R. Golka**  
*Bishop of Colorado Springs*