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Catholic Elements of Immigration Reform

“What is clearly true, and what the Church and many others have called for, is the urgent need for a comprehensive reform of our country’s immigration system. The U.S. immigration system is overly complex and unjust, often keeping family members apart; it must be fixed.”

—*Statement of the USCCB Administrative Committee (March 17, 2022)*

For decades, the Catholic bishops of the United States have been consistent and steadfast in their calls for a just reform of the nation’s immigration system. The elements of reform articulated below are grounded in [Catholic social teaching generally](#) and the [Church’s teaching on migration specifically](#), including the joint pastoral letter released by the American and Mexican bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (2003).

Element 1: Enforcement efforts should be targeted, proportional, and humane

Safeguarding American communities and upholding the rule of law are laudable goals. At the same time, a country’s rights to regulate its borders and enforce its immigration laws must be balanced with its responsibilities to uphold the sanctity of human life, respect the God-given dignity of all persons, and enact policies that further the common good. Whether along an international border or in the interior of the country, enforcement measures should focus on those who present genuine risks and dangers to society, particularly efforts to reduce gang activity, stem the flow of drugs, and end human trafficking. Just enforcement also requires limiting the use of detention, especially for families, children, pregnant women, the sick, elderly, and disabled, given its proven harms and the pervasive lack of appropriate care in detention settings. Military personnel, resources, and tactics should not be used in immigration enforcement. Deportations and other enforcement actions should always be carried out with due regard for families, community ties, and religious liberty interests.

Element 2: Humanitarian protections and due process should be ensured

From refugee resettlement, asylum, and temporary protected status, to visas for victims of trafficking and abused youth, humanitarian protections are essential components of an immigration system that furthers the common good. Reforms to the U.S. asylum system in particular should not raise what is already a high bar for relief, given the potential threats to human life if refoulement were to occur. Meanwhile, third-country resettlement is a durable and mutually beneficial solution for refugees who cannot safely return to their country of origin. Immigration processes, whether affirmative or defensive, must also be subject to due process. The dehumanization or vilification of noncitizens as a means to deprive them of protection under the law is not only contrary to the rule of law but an affront to God himself, who has created them in his own image. Further restricting access to humanitarian protections will only endanger those who are most vulnerable and deserving of relief.

Element 3: Long-time residents should have an earned pathway to citizenship

History does not support the belief that opportunities for long-time undocumented residents to regularize their status significantly increases illegal immigration. Today, nearly 12 million people are estimated to be living in the United States without legal status. This number has remained between 10 and 12 million since 2005. Almost one-third of the undocumented population consists of those brought to the United States as children, commonly known as “Dreamers”. It also includes approximately 300,000 farmworkers, about half of the U.S. agricultural workforce. A significant majority of the undocumented population has lived in the United States for over a decade (some estimates place this percentage at upwards of 80%). Meanwhile, the population already contributes an estimated \$100 billion in federal, state, and local taxes each year. Providing legal processes for long-time residents and other undocumented immigrants to regularize their status would strengthen the American economy, provide stability to communities, and keep families together.

Element 4: Family unity should remain a cornerstone of the U.S. system

Catholic teaching maintains that families are the foundation of society, and the success of any civilization hinges on the well-being of its families. For generations, families living in the United States have included combinations of citizens and noncitizens. Immigration reform measures should be evaluated according to whether they strengthen families and promote family unity. U.S. citizen members of mixed-status families should not be penalized with restrictive policies that require eligibility for programs or services to hinge on an entire family being comprised of citizens.

Element 5: Legal pathways should be expanded, reliable, and efficient

An enforcement-only approach to immigration disregards the benefits of immigration and the contributions of immigrants, as well as the many legitimate motivations people have for migrating, including family reunification, educational opportunities, employment, and humanitarian needs. Meanwhile, limits on legal immigration pathways established several decades ago are no longer responsive to the social, economic, and geopolitical realities of today. Unreliable processes and inadequate legal pathways have merely contributed to an increase in irregular migration, even as enforcement efforts have been steadily intensified. Improving and increasing opportunities for people to lawfully enter the United States, on both a temporary and permanent basis, are necessary steps to address several pressing issues, from family separation to regional labor shortages. New legal pathways should be created, and backlogs resulting in decades-long wait times should be eliminated.

Element 6: The root causes of forced migration should be addressed

Migration has been a consistent phenomenon throughout human history. The Bible itself depicts a series of migrations, including that of the Holy Family fleeing persecution. An effective and sustainable response to increased migration must include efforts to address its root causes, especially in the case of forced migration. The preeminent right to life provides that people should be able to flourish in their homeland, with migration being a free choice (known in Catholic teaching as the right not to migrate). However, when the conditions for a dignified life are absent, people have the natural right to migrate, and countries have a duty to accommodate that right to the extent possible. There are a multitude of factors causing people around the world to migrate in large numbers today, often as the only way to sustain or protect human life. This cannot be addressed unilaterally (i.e., a domestic overemphasis on deterrence) or by shifting responsibility (i.e., externalization of borders) but requires meaningful cooperation between the United States and other countries.