



Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Migration

by Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

The rights of migrants (refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and internally displaced persons-IDPs) begin with the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the dignity and sanctity of the human person. The right to life and the conditions worthy of life—when threatened by poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflict, and other root causes—give rise to the right to migrate.¹ As Pope John XXIII explained:

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that one is a citizen of a particular state does not detract in any way from his membership in the human family as a whole, nor from his citizenship in the world community.²

This is a right to both emigrate from one's own country and immigrate into another country.

In 2003, the bishops of the United States and Mexico named five principles³ that have emerged from the "rich tradition of church teachings with regard to migration":

First, persons have a right to find opportunities in their own homeland. This principle reflects the responsibilities of all citizens and governments for the common good, creating the political, economic, and social conditions for persons to live in dignity, raise their families, use their God-given gifts, and find employment that provides a living family wage—a fundamental principle of CST dating back to the 19th century. Wealthy and powerful nations are

obliged to assist less developed nations in creating the conditions for people to live dignified lives.

Second, persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. Pope Pius XII declared in 1952 that both natural law and devotion to humanity required that international migration be opened to people forced from their countries by revolutions, unemployment, or hunger. He explained, "For the Creator of the universe made all good things primarily for the good of all."⁴ When people cannot find adequate work, they have a natural right to work elsewhere to attain the means of survival for themselves and their families.

Third, sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. Our tradition recognizes the right of nations to control their territories, a right arising from their responsibility for the common good. However, as Pope Pius indicated, this right is not absolute. State sovereignty "cannot be exaggerated to the point that access to this land is, for inadequate or unjustified reasons, denied to needy and decent people from other nations..." Balancing rights then becomes critical.

The U.S. and Mexican bishops note that individual rights and state responsibility for the common good are complementary.

While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons

must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible.⁵

In 2000, the U.S. bishops, reflecting on the tension between border control and the individual right to fundamental dignity, declared the latter to "give rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life."⁶

Fourth, refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution have a greater claim for protection from the global community. As the U.S. and Mexican bishops urged, "This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority."⁷

Fifth, the human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected. As the bishops note, "Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent dignity that should be respected."⁸ This applies to punitive laws, enforcement practices, detention conditions, abuse and neglect, and policies that tear families apart.

Even undocumented workers, often subject to inadequate wages and demeaning conditions in a shadow economy, are entitled to basic human rights in terms of wages and working conditions. Immigrant workers, even ones without documents, do not lose their status as human persons made in God's image. Demeaning wages, inhuman conditions, and the denial of workers' natural rights assault the dignity and sanctity of the human person.

1 Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, joint pastoral letter concerning migration, January 2003, Nos. 28-29.

2 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, No. 25.

3 *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., Nos. 33-39.

4 Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia*, Apostolic Constitution, Vatican City, 1952.

5 *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., No. 39.

6 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, Washington, D.C., 2000, p. 11.

7 *Strangers No Longer*, op. cit., No. 37.

8 *Ibid.*, No. 38.