A Call for Christian Compassion and Wisdom in the Immigration Debate

We write as Christian leaders who love our country and our immigrant neighbors. As Catholic and evangelical Christians, we have doctrinal differences, but we are united in our conviction that God calls us to stand both with our fellow Americans who are experiencing economic and cultural anxieties and with our immigrant neighbors who are facing existential challenges.

We write with a special focus on children and families. Jesus taught that whenever we welcome a child in his name, we are welcoming him (*Matthew* 18:5). Following our Lord, we work and pray for the well-being of all God's children and especially for those who are far from home.

+ Biblical Principles

Three fundamental scriptural truths speak to all of us in this moment:

Every human being is created with dignity, bearing God's image (*Genesis* 1:27).

Before anyone is an immigrant or native-born person, documented or undocumented, citizen or noncitizen, he or she is a glorious creation of God (*Psalm* 8:4–8), a precious human being for whom Jesus died (*John* 3:16), and a neighbor who has a claim on our conscience (*Leviticus* 19:18; *Matthew* 22:34–40). This dignity comes from God, not government, and no earthly power may erase it. This conviction guides our approach to all social issues, including the current reality of immigration, which is a matter of human dignity.

Our Lord is the Lord who watches over the foreigner (*Psalm* 146:9) and instructs his people to love the stranger as themselves, for they were once foreigners (*Leviticus* 19:34; *Deuteronomy* 10:19). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that, in welcoming strangers, some have "welcomed angels without knowing it" (*Hebrews* 13:2). When Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" He answered with the story of a Samaritan who showed mercy to a stranger of another people (*Luke* 10:29–37)—so our concern, too, reaches every person in need.

The stranger is not merely a burden to bear. Again and again, God has blessed his people through the outsider. From Ruth the Moabite to the present day, immigrants can bring renewal to congregations and communities that welcome them. We lament approaches that pit citizens against noncitizens.

The same biblical mandates apply with equal force to our own citizens who are living in poverty and vulnerability. God has abundantly provided for the needs of all his creation.

The family is ordained by God as the foundational human institution and should be protected in both law and practice (*Genesis* 2:24).

Throughout the Bible, God establishes and works through families. God promised Abraham a large family and said that through him all families would be blessed (*Genesis* 12:1–3). The Ten Commandments teach obedience to parents and faithfulness in marriage (*Exodus* 20:12, 14). Children are seen as blessings from God (*Psalm* 127:3), and parents are responsible for their upbringing (*Deuteronomy* 6:6–7; *Ephesians* 6:4). Caring for family members in need is integral to faithful discipleship (1 *Timothy* 5:8). Jesus taught that marriage is ordained by God and warned that "man must not separate, then, what God has joined together" (*Matthew* 19:6).

What is true of biological families also has relevance to those who have been gathered into God's larger family. The unity among the members of the Body of Christ is so intense that "if one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness" (1 *Corinthians* 12:26). It is this image that St. Paul so often used to refer to the Church (*Romans* 12:3–7; *Ephesians* 4:11–16; *Colossians* 2:19) that stirs within us a profound sense of empathy and responsibility. How can we as Christians feel otherwise when the Lord our God reminds us that we, too, were once strangers in a foreign land (*Leviticus* 19:33-34)?

As evangelical and Catholic leaders, we are aware that the vast majority of those currently subject to detention and deportation are Catholic and evangelical Christians. Roughly one in 12 believers in this country either faces the loss of legal status or shares a home with someone who does. Their fear is our fear; their tears are ours to wipe.

Government is responsible for protecting its citizens and providing for the common good, including the establishment and enforcement of reasonable immigration policies (*Romans* 13:1–7).

We affirm the responsibility of government to maintain secure and well-managed borders that safeguard all who reside in our communities, while also fulfilling the duty to uphold religious liberty, protect the persecuted, and facilitate pathways for legal immigration.

We do not disparage law enforcement. To the contrary, we are grateful for their service and recognize they have a necessary role for the good of society. They also bear God's image, and many feel the weight of moral injury when duty and conscience collide.

Even the most well-intended laws and upstanding law enforcers can produce unjust and immoral outcomes. When the civil law, as enacted and enforced, fails to promote the moral law, all people

of good will, and most especially our elected officials, are called to work toward sensible reforms. This is the very expectation upon which a righteous rule of law depends.

St. Paul teaches that governing authority is meant to be not a terror to good conduct, but to bad (*Romans* 13:3). To focus enforcement on the peaceful and productive majority, rather than on those who seek to do harm, is not an expression of Romans 13 but a departure from it. To tear a mother from her children or leave a citizen spouse to raise a family alone is to create the very widows and orphans Scripture commands us to defend (*James* 1:27; *Proverbs* 31:8).

+ A Better Way Forward

In recent months, we as evangelicals and Catholics have acknowledged the signs of the times. We have witnessed within our communities the sowing of fear, the fracturing of families, the deprivation of due process, and the vilification of our neighbors. In the midst of this state of affairs, we have also seen the hope instilled by faith in Jesus Christ and acts of loving care among neighbors.

There is much that can be done to avoid the rupturing of our families and communities brought about by indiscriminate and aggressive enforcement actions. Together with the executive branch, legislators have an important role to play. In spite of the positive impacts many immigrants have made in our country, some over the course of multiple decades, the existing legal pathways to permanent status are extremely limited and out of reach for most. Only Congress is empowered to address these statutory shortcomings of our legal immigration system.

Catholic and evangelical Christians make up a large portion of our American citizenry. Majorities of evangelicals and Catholics support immigration reform that would provide meaningful opportunities for longtime residents to regularize their status. From our perspective, such a reform would also ensure:

- Immigration is regulated and borders are secured using targeted, proportionate, and humane measures, protecting family unity and prioritizing enforcement against those who threaten public safety, always with respect for due process;
- Detention of non-violent immigrants, especially children and families, is strictly limited, with meaningful access to chaplaincy and legal counsel for all who are detained; and
- Legal pathways are safe, reliable, and efficient for workers, family members, and humanitarian populations, with access to legal representation.

We especially commit to upholding the right to religious liberty. This right extends to all people, of all faiths and none, no matter their immigration status. It is implicated in a particular way for those in detention, for whom we as Christians are specifically compelled by Christ to offer our pastoral care (*Matthew* 25:31–46). We are resolute in our commitment to working with the relevant authorities to ensure access to religious and pastoral services for all in detention, that each person may have the opportunity for spiritual counsel and active participation in the sacraments.

+ A Call to All Americans

As we Christians are called to unity in diversity, our American tradition embodies a similar spirit, summarized on the Great Seal of the United States: *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one. This is further embodied by our Statue of Liberty welcoming immigrants with the torch of freedom and the words of Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Today, in support of this Union, we speak with one voice as both Christians and Americans.

In commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we dedicate our shared efforts to those ideals enshrined in our nation's founding document:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

These values set forth a vision of our country where the dignity of every human person is protected and the family is promoted as the foundation of a rightly ordered society, where we have security and humane law enforcement.

We commit to creating further opportunities for education and dialogue within, and between, our traditions about how we can better realize this vision in our time and for future generations, especially in the context of immigration. We invite our local congregations to do the same.

+ Our Prayer

We embrace the biblical call to pray for our leaders (1 *Timothy* 2:1–2). Our promise of prayer extends to our law enforcement officers, our policymakers, our judges, and all in our communities who play an essential role in building up the common good. Every Christian deserves to know that he or she has been made a new creation in Christ and is a member of his Body—no matter what the particular circumstances of duty or residence.

St. Paul teaches us that as the members of the Body of Christ we have received the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 *Corinthians* 5:18–19). May our words and our actions reflect the Truth we have received, not only for our individual benefit but for the soul of our nation.

We do not offer these words in anger or partisanship but in hope, trusting that the God of the exile and the stranger has not abandoned his people.

> *May the Lord make us such a people for such a time as this—who welcome as we have been welcomed and love as we have first been loved.*

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