

Migrants and Refugees. The Social Teaching of the Church

[Executive Summary:

Catholic Social Teaching consistently affirms the moral obligation to uphold the **inherent dignity of migrants and refugees**, grounded in Scripture, the Church's tradition, and a great number of papal teachings. Migration is not viewed primarily as a political problem, but as a **human and moral reality** that calls for solidarity, justice, and compassion.

Pope Francis made migration central to his papacy, forcefully condemning the "globalization of indifference" toward human suffering. He insisted that migrants must never be reduced to statistics or threats, but recognized as persons whose dignity precedes legal status. In *Fratelli Tutti* and numerous addresses, he emphasized fraternity, dialogue, and social friendship as antidotes to fear, racism, and exclusion. His pastoral framework is summarized in four imperatives: **welcome, protect, promote, and integrate**.

Pope Leo XIV, drawing from his pastoral experience amid large-scale migration, reinforces this teaching while introducing a distinctive emphasis: migrants as "**missionaries of hope**." He calls the Church to reject neutrality in the face of injustice and to see migration as both a human tragedy and an opportunity for spiritual renewal. While affirming the right of states to regulate borders, he unequivocally rejects policies that dehumanize or treat migrants as disposable.

The **U.S. bishops**, applying these principles domestically, affirm border security but insist that all immigration policies must respect human dignity. They oppose mass deportations, family separation, dehumanizing rhetoric, and restrictions on birthright citizenship, advocating instead for humane, just, and morally responsible reform faithful to the Gospel command to welcome the stranger.]

"The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, [...] for all times and places, is the paradigm and protector of every migrant and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave their native land, their beloved parents [...] to seek a foreign soil." Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia*, 1952.

"We cannot insist too much on the duty of giving foreigners a hospitable reception. It is a duty imposed by human solidarity and by Christian charity, and it is incumbent upon families and educational institutions in the host nations." Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967.

"The first way to help these people is to listen to them in order to become acquainted with their situation, and, whatever their legal status with regard to State law, to provide them with the necessary means of subsistence." Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Migration Day*, 1996.

The above citations are simply a few of the many Papal teachings on Migrants and Refugees. Indeed, since 1914, the Church has marked, at the end of September, the World Day of Migrants and Refugees and since John Paul II with an annual message of the Popes¹. So, for over 110 years there has been a clear teaching regarding this theme, which is as old as human civilization.

Here, we will simply focus on the two recent Popes. Pope Francis served as head of the Church for 12 years, and Pope Leo XIV, who has completed only one year. Also, included here are some insights by the United States bishops.

A) Pope Francis

Pope Francis, like many of those who were born in the Americas, was the child of immigrants. In his case, his parents emigrated to Argentina from Italy. This probably made him very conscious of the struggles that migrants often find in their new host country. The issue of migrants and their condition was a central concern during his papacy, and in fact, his first visit as Pope outside of Rome was to the Italian island of Lampedusa where many migrants landed on their way to Europe.

In this summary of his teachings, we will focus on only a few of the many sources available. First, his visit to Lampedusa, then his social encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, his visit to Marseilles, a few of the messages he gave for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees and the World Day of Peace, and finally his reflections on the role of the Catholic University today.

Visit to Lampedusa²

This island received many migrants and refugees coming from diverse regions of Africa and Asia. The crossing of the Mediterranean Sea was costly in terms of human lives lost, as overloaded and rickety boats often capsized and sank. The chalice he used in the mass that day was made out of wood from one of the capsized vessels, a powerful symbolic link between the blood of Christ and that of the suffering migrants. We can see three themes here to guide the Church's response:

¹ The date of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees has changed several times since 1914. Pope Francis moved it to the end of September. Since 1985, John Paul II issued a message each year drawing attention to some of the specific realities and difficulties of people on the move, calling the Church to action.

² Pope Francis, *Homily*, Visit to Lampedusa, 8 July 2013.

Overcoming Indifference

His homily during this visit underscores the suffering the Pope feels for what was transpiring on the sea. He explained why this became his first place for a visit as pope: *“Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart. So I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated.”*

It is here that he coins one of his definitive expressions: *“the globalization of indifference”* which challenges the consciences of all, saying that people are avoiding responsibility for the tragedy unfolding in front of their own eyes: *“Today no one in our world feels responsible; we have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We have fallen into the hypocrisy of the priest and the levite whom Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan... The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, ...it even leads to the globalization of indifference...”*

Pope Francis uses two questions that God asks in the book of Genesis, one addressed to Adam “where are you?” and one addressed to Cain “where is your brother?” The questions point to our human dignity and human responsibility for others by seeing them not as “others”.

To hear the Cry of the Suffering

Pope Francis then ties this indifference to the inability of feeling for the suffering. He will speak often in his teachings about the “cry of the poor” and the “cry of the earth” especially in his document on Care of the Common Home (*Laudato si*). Here in Lampedusa, we see the first use of this by saying that the migrants *“fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God!”*

This cry, however, often is not heard by us, and we remain unaffected. As he says: *“the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! ... let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts, and of all those who in anonymity make social and economic decisions which open the door to tragic situations like this.”* “To hear the cry” of the suffering, the poor, the discarded, is the starting point to overcome the culture of indifference.

Our Common Humanity

One of the great challenges that emerges from the migrant and refugee crisis is to look upon the migrant as “the other,” namely, as someone fundamentally different than myself. By seeing “the other” through the prism of nationality, language or culture, we don’t see

that we are all one people of God. As the Pope remarked: "*The other' is no longer a brother or sister to be loved, but simply someone who disturbs my life and my comfort.*" In citing God's first two questions to human beings, Pope Francis underscores that we are responsible for others who are not, in fact, "others", but our brothers and sisters.

Fratelli Tutti (FT)³

One of the guiding documents of Pope Francis is *Fratelli Tutti* (FT), (All are Brothers and Sisters, 2020.). FT is written in light of the lack of global solidarity during the Covid19 health pandemic and the increased polarization in our world between different cultures, so it is not specifically focused on the question of migration. However, we see here important values that guide the Church, and all of humanity, in an ethical response to the migrant crisis.

First, he underscores the theme of human dignity against the "throwaway culture" that treats human beings as objects. In fact, he looks at this tendency as a form of "violence". The throwaway culture in this document is not centered on material goods, rather, this issue of "discarding," focuses on the human being. In addition to contempt for the poorest, "*a readiness to discard others finds expression in vicious attitudes that we thought long past, such as racism, which retreats underground only to keep reemerging.*" (FT 20) and is clearly manifested in the rejection of migrants from another country or culture. The Pope in FT offers a new direction so that "*in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship.*" (FT 6).

Fraternity and social friendship are two concepts mentioned from the beginning of the document and are the motivation for writing it. The key to universal fraternity is to recognize that all share the same human dignity and have the same human rights and the same right to integral development that respects that dignity. Based on this perspective towards the other and his/her dignity, fraternity and social friendship need to underscore certain values and convictions so that it "*does not remain in words.*" (FT 6). Three values are underlined and form an important part of the Pope's pastoral vision regarding migrants and refugees:

1) Solidarity

FT devotes a section to the "value of solidarity." Solidarity is manifested very clearly in dealing with migrants. Certainly, Pope Francis placed much emphasis on defending them by making his first visit, after his election, to the island of Lampedusa. Migrants suffer great abuses because in many places they are considered as "*less worthy, less important, less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable*" (FT 39). On the

³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship*, 2020.

contrary, solidarity means that *“our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote and integrate.”* (FT 129). The Pope repeats those same four verbs in many of his speeches and documents.

2) Tolerance

One of the challenges in the world is intolerance towards “the other” who is different. FT considers the example of the early Christian communities, living in the midst of the Roman empire, where the reality was of a society *“overflowing with corruption and deviations,”* (FT 239), and how Christians showed in their response *“a sense of patience, tolerance, understanding.”* (FT 237).

This tolerance is necessary in all environments because of today's more polarized political life, that ends up forming intolerant groups, disqualifying the person who has another point of view, and this makes it very difficult to unite with others in search of the common good of the nation and world. The result is that in the *“petty game of disqualifications, the debate is manipulated into a permanent state of questioning and confrontation.”* (FT 15). The attitude of tolerance towards the other, and an acceptance of the differences of culture with different peoples, leads to an appreciation of the rich variety of human beings that are part of God's plan of creation. Far too often, the immigrant population has faced intolerance, which results in derision and hostility, the exact opposite of the Pope's teaching in FT.

3) Dialogue and Encounter

The words “dialogue” and “encounter” are among the most repeated in the document. The Pope says: *“Between selfish indifference and violent protest, there is always one possible option: dialogue.”* (FT 199). Dialogue means: *“Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground.”* (FT 198).

Fostering a culture of encounter is a necessary step for authentic dialogue. For the Pope, it is impossible to separate the two concepts since, through encounter, dialogue is possible, and through dialogue encounter is authentic and makes social friendship possible. As he says: *“What is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences”.* (FT 217).

Encounter and dialogue enrich human beings. By opening up to other perspectives, it is possible to discover the richness of each person and his or her culture. The opposite of that is *“the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land”* (FT 27).

Visit to Marseille⁴

In his only visit to France, Pope Francis went to a meeting of all the bishops that border the Mediterranean Sea, in Europe, Asia, and Africa. In his remarks, he referred to three symbols that represent the values that the Church both gives to the world, and which it is called to live itself. The symbols are the Sea, the Port, and the Lighthouse. Marseille is a great port city on the Mediterranean, and there is a large lighthouse that overlooks the city. Thus, these become the reference points for the Pope's remarks to underscore the common humanity that leads to seeing the migrant not as a burden but as a brother and sister, to listen to their cry, and to respond in charity by welcoming and integrating them into society.

The Sea

He relates the history of the Mediterranean to another sea, the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus walked and did most of his ministry. He states:

“A multifaceted and in many ways unstable context was the place for the universal proclamation of the Beatitudes, in the name of a God who is Father of all...This was also an invitation to broaden the frontiers of the heart, overcoming ethnic and cultural barriers.”

Here then is the answer that comes from the Mediterranean: *“this perennial Sea of Galilee urges us to oppose the divisiveness of conflicts with the ‘coexistence of differences’...”* which, the Pope says, *“bears within itself a global vocation to fraternity.”*

This call to a common humanity of all peoples is the cornerstone for the promotion of human dignity, especially towards those who are on the margins, such as immigrants. The Pope continues his teaching:

“Let us, the Church and civil society, start anew by listening to the poor who should be embraced, not counted for they are faces, not numbers. The change of direction in our communities lies in treating them as brothers and sisters whose stories we know, not as troublesome problems or chasing them away, sending them home; it lies in welcoming them, not hiding them; in integrating them, not evicting them; in giving them dignity.”

Yet reality is often different than the values we hope to live by. Thus, as Pope Francis says: *“there is a cry of pain that resonates most of all, and it is turning the Mediterranean, the mare nostrum, from the cradle of civilization into the mare mortuum, the graveyard of dignity: it is the stifled cry of migrant brothers and sisters.”*

The Port

⁴ Pope Francis, *Final Session of the “Rencontres Méditerranéennes”*, 2023. Unless otherwise noted, the quotes in this section are from this speech in Marseille.

This brings him to the image of the port, and it is here that he clearly raises a voice of protest at what is happening around the world towards immigrants. He sees all about where the doors are closed, the ports are shut, so that no one can enter. Diverse arguments are presented by governments to justify these actions. But he says there needs to be a different response, and once again he mentions the verbs that define the challenge of the migrant crisis: *“Migrants must be welcomed, protected or accompanied, promoted and integrated. If this does not take place, then migrants end up on the margins of society. Welcomed, accompanied, promoted and integrated: this is the style.”*

There is no pretense that this is an easy challenge, but all too often the answer is just, “no”, “enough”. And so he reminds us of the gospel values that need to inform our thinking:

“As Christians, who believe in God made man, in the one inimitable Man who on the shores of the Mediterranean called himself the way, the truth and the life (cf. Jn 14:6), we cannot accept that the paths of encounter should be closed. Please, let us not close the paths of encounter! We cannot accept that the truth of Mammon should prevail over human dignity, that life should turn into death!”

Guided by our values, there must be a way that:

“entails accompanying and managing waves of migration as best we can, constructing bridges and not walls, expanding channels for a safe and regular migration. In whatever place we decide to build our future, in the country of our birth or elsewhere, the important thing is that there always be a community ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate everyone, without distinctions and without excluding anyone.”⁵

The Lighthouse

This segways into the symbol of the lighthouse and here he reflects particularly on young university students, since Marseille is a large university city with 15% of its students from diverse countries. He speaks directly to the university community saying:

“Be laboratories of dreams and workshops of the future, where young people mature by encountering one another, coming to know one another, and discovering cultures and contexts both near and diverse. In this way, prejudices are dismantled, wounds are healed and fundamentalist rhetoric is rejected. Be aware of the preaching of so many fundamentalisms that are fashionable today! Young people, well prepared and used to socializing will be able to open unexpected doors of dialogue.”

Messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees

⁵ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2023.

The messages for the annual World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which has been marked by the Church since 1914, are short, and many of the values mentioned earlier concerning migrants are reinforced in these messages.

Human Dignity

First, we can highlight that the Pope wants us to see migrants as human beings, who merit to be treated with dignity. As he remarks: *“Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.”*⁶ This is the starting point of any ethical response to the migration issue. From this perspective he says: *“it is important to view migrants not only on the basis of their status as regular or irregular, but above all as people whose dignity is to be protected.”*⁷ This coincides with overcoming a global tendency towards indifference since *“the Gospel of mercy troubles our consciences, prevents us from taking the suffering of others for granted.”*⁸

The call for dignity contrasts with what he sees as the response of rich countries considering the migrants as “others”, as not fully entitled to the same rights and treatment as those in the more economically developed nations. As he remarks: *“And the highest price is being paid by those who most easily become viewed as others: foreigners, migrants, the marginalized, those living on the existential peripheries.”*⁹ It is on those “existential peripheries” that *“we find many migrants and refugees, displaced persons and victims of trafficking, to whom the Lord wants his love to be manifested and his salvation preached.”*¹⁰

One human family

Pope Francis constantly brings to light one of the principal aspects of the Christian faith, namely that everyone is equally a child of God and that barriers based on nationality, economic conditions and social position should not result in walls but be enriched by “encounter.” It is here that he calls upon making ever wider and more inclusive the “we” of the human family: *“I also make this appeal to journey together towards an ever wider ‘we’ to all men and women, for the sake of renewing the human family, building together a future of justice and peace, and ensuring that no one is left behind.”*¹¹ This ever embracing “we”, in place of the “us and them” mentality, underscores the basic truth *“that we are all in the*

⁶ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2023.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2016.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2016.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2021.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2021.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2021

same boat and called to work together so that there will be no more walls that separate us, no longer others, but only a single ‘we’, encompassing all of humanity.”¹²

The Right not to Migrate

The message on World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2023 focused on a theme not often previously reflected upon, namely the right not to leave one’s own country. Pope Francis makes clear that large numbers are, in a sense, forced to flee because of war, hunger, climatic disasters, etc. *“The decision to migrate should always be free, yet in many cases, even in our day, it is not. Conflicts, natural disasters, or more simply the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one’s native land is forcing millions of persons to leave.”¹³* He further underscores this right: *“The Church stands at the side of all who work to defend each person’s right to live with dignity, first and foremost by exercising the right not to emigrate and to contribute to the development of one’s country of origin.”¹⁴*

This right “not to immigrate” is based on the need for bringing peace and economic development to the poor and conflict-ridden countries from which migrants are escaping. *“Migrants flee because of poverty, fear or desperation. Eliminating these causes and thus putting an end to forced migration calls for shared commitment on the part of all, in accordance with the responsibilities of each.”¹⁵* Here he is reminding us of the calls of Pope Paul VI, 50 years previously, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) about the urgent need for the wealthy nations to help in the development of the poorer ones which Pope Francis states will help reduce some of the major causes of migration. Citing this document, Pope Francis remarks: *“Pope Paul listed ‘three duties’ of the more developed nations, ‘stemming from the human and supernatural brotherhood of man... mutual solidarity – the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations; social justice – the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; universal charity – the effort to build a more human world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others.’”¹⁶* This is a call to universal justice, based on the Catholic Social teaching of the “universal destiny of goods,” namely the conviction that God creates everything for the good of everyone and not just a chosen few. The call to mutual solidarity, social justice and universal charity points to the need and obligation of helping eliminate the causes of migration at their source.

Correcting Negative Images

¹² Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2021.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2023.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2016.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2023.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Final Session of the “Rencontres Méditerranéennes”, 2023. He cites *Populorum progressio*, 44.

Certainly, in our present day, the issue of immigration can be made into a political lightning rod with the danger that the migrants are presented in a purely negative light, projecting “blame”, since *“they are often looked down upon and considered the source of all society’s ills.”*¹⁷ Pope Francis warns us to be on the alert for this:

*“Many destination countries have seen the spread of rhetoric decrying the risks posed to national security or the high cost of welcoming new arrivals, and thus demeaning the human dignity due to all as sons and daughters of God. Those who, for what may be political reasons, foment fear of migrants instead of building peace are sowing violence, racial discrimination and xenophobia, which are matters of great concern for all those concerned for the safety of every human being.”*¹⁸

In the social media environment today, false images are presented of migrants, creating untrue narratives that prejudice public opinion. This means that communications and social media have a duty not to replicate and augment the negative and manipulative images given about migrants. *“The communications media have a role of great responsibility in this regard”* says the Pope, *“it is up to them, in fact, to break down stereotypes ... A change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter... The communications media are themselves called to embrace this ‘conversion of attitudes’ and to promote this change in the way migrants and refugees are treated.”*¹⁹

The Pope is very aware that in the more industrialized societies, there are many fears concerning the immigrants coming to their borders. This is a real concern for many people; however, it cannot overwhelm our moral compass and duties. He puts these fears into a gospel context: *“But the problem is not that we have doubts and fears. The problem is when they condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other, the person different from myself; it deprives me of an opportunity to encounter the Lord.”*²⁰

The Face of Christ

Pope Francis challenges society, especially Christians, to invert their mental images regarding migrants and to see in them the face of Christ. *“Jesus Christ is always waiting to*

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2019.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Message World Day of Peace*, 1 Jan. 2018. Starting with Pope Paul VI each year on January 1 the Church marks the World Day of Peace with a papal message.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2014.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2019.

be recognized in migrants and refugees, in displaced persons and in exiles,”²¹ and he states as well: “Displaced people offer us this opportunity to meet the Lord, even though our eyes find it hard to recognize him: his clothing in tatters, his feet dirty, his face disfigured, his body wounded, his tongue unable to speak our language”²²

Migrants and refugees effectively are the focus of God’s love in a preferential way: “God’s plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries. Among them are many migrants and refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking. The Kingdom of God is to be built with them, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants.”²³

The Four Verbs

Clearly, one of the principal teachings of Pope Francis revolves around four action verbs that he constantly raises to underscore that embracing migrants and refugees requires a change of attitude towards them. These are: welcome, protect or accompany, promote and integrate. In his 2018 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis elaborated a little on what each of these verbs commits us to: ²⁴

‘Welcoming’ calls for expanding legal pathways for entry and no longer pushing migrants and displaced people towards countries where they face persecution and violence. It also demands balancing our concerns about national security with concern for fundamental human rights....

‘Protecting’ has to do with our duty to recognize and defend the inviolable dignity of those who flee real dangers in search of asylum and security, and to prevent their being exploited....

‘Promoting’ entails supporting the integral human development of migrants and refugees. Among many possible means of doing so, I would stress the importance of ensuring access to all levels of education for children and young people. This will enable them not only to cultivate and realize their potential, but also better equip them to encounter others and to foster a spirit of dialogue rather than rejection or confrontation...

‘Integrating’, lastly, means allowing refugees and migrants to participate fully in the life of the society that welcomes them, as part of a process of mutual enrichment

²¹ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2015.

²² Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2020.

²³ Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2022.

²⁴ A more detailed explanation of these four verbs is found in Pope Francis, *Message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2018.

*and fruitful cooperation in service of the integral human development of the local community...*²⁵

The Role of Universities

In the thinking of Pope Francis there is a particular mission of the Catholic University in the great causes of justice of our day. To understand this, we can recall his words to the meeting of the International Federation of Catholic Universities²⁶, of which there are over two thousand in the world. Three things are asked for:

- a) To work more closely together, breaking out of the academic silos to build a networking of Catholic Universities. As the Pope said: *“cooperate through ‘networking’....We can imagine the potential of more effective and improved working relationships for strengthening the Catholic university system. At a time of great fragmentation, we must dare to counter the trend, and to globalize hope, unity and concord in place of indifference, polarization and conflict.”*
- b) To be a powerful voice in society for the cause of gospel values. As he remarked:

“Never encircle the university with walls of fear. Don’t let a Catholic university merely replicate the walls typical of the societies in which we live: those of inequality, dehumanization, intolerance and indifference, or models aimed at promoting individualism rather than investing in fraternity....We must always ask ourselves: What is the purpose of the learning we impart? What is the transformative potential of the knowledge we produce? What and whom do we serve? Neutrality is a mirage. A Catholic university must make choices, choices that reflect the Gospel. It must take a stand and clearly show it in its actions, “getting its hands dirty” in the spirit of the Gospel, for the transformation of the world and in service to the human person.”

- c) To promote new ideas on how to address the great challenges of ecology and the poor. This requires for universities *“to identify the new frontiers of thought, science and technology and to approach them with balance and wisdom. Help us to build intergenerational and intercultural covenants for the protection and care of our common home, within a vision of integral ecology, and in this way respond effectively to the cry of the earth and the plea of the poor.”*

With that framework we are more able to put into context the remarks the Pope gave to a meeting of Catholic Universities exploring “Initiatives in Refugee and Migrant Education”²⁷. Here we can underscore some of the Pope’s major points around *“three areas pertaining to your competence: the areas of research, teaching and social promotion. For it is not enough simply to welcome migrants, they must be welcomed, accompanied, promoted*

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Message World Day of Peace*, 1 Jan. 2018.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Address to a Delegation of The International Federation of Catholic Universities*, 19 January 2024.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Meeting on Refugees Promoted by The Pontifical Gregorian University*, 29 September 2022.

and integrated.”

a) Research: Here the Pope asks for more research into the theme of the right “not to migrate.” As mentioned previously, this is focused on alleviating the causes for which people decide to leave their homes. He mentions war and then states: *“I would like to point to another kind of violence, namely, the abuse of our common home.”* The ecological damage that comes about because of greed and corruption increases ecological disasters, where land loses its productivity, and people are forced to migrate. *“Catholic academia in particular – is called to play a primary role in providing answers to ecological problems and challenges”* as part of its contribution of overcoming the reasons people must migrate, thus reaffirming this “right not to migrate.”

b) Teaching: In this area, the Pope calls for *“establishing educational programmes that benefit refugees”* by collaborating between universities to provide possible distant learning initiatives to respond to the needs of migrants and refugees. At the same time, we see the emergence of the theme of universities promoting encounters and integration with migrants:

“Catholic institutions of higher learning are called to educate their own students...to a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of migration, within a perspective of justice, global responsibility and communion in diversity. Opportunities for meaningful encounters are to be promoted, so that teachers and students can have an opportunity to hear the stories of those men and women who are migrants, refugees, displaced persons or victims of trafficking.”

d) Social promotion: Here, universities are called to help promote the *“foundations for the construction of an intercultural society,”* where diversity is seen as a source of strength. At the same time, students are called to work with migrants in fulfilling the four verbs of welcoming, accompanying, promoting, and integrating, because *“universities represent a privileged setting for encouraging young people to engage in volunteer work on behalf of refugees, asylum seekers and the more vulnerable migrants.”*

Conclusion Pope Francis

The Catholic Social Teaching, as enunciated in the teachings of Pope Francis with regard to the situation of migrants and refugees, has numerous and important mileposts in directing an ethical response to the global migration phenomenon. Focusing on human dignity and the proper treatment of migrants, inverting the negative images to see in the migrant a blessing and not a curse, underscoring the complexities that are the root of the migrants leaving their homes, and then responding with the four guiding verbs, we have the essence of Pope Francis’ magisterial teachings.

B) Pope Leo XIV

Background:

The present Migrant and Refugee crisis is a global phenomenon, and this was as true in Peru as it is in other parts of the world. During the years of Robert Prevost's (now Pope Leo) service in Chiclayo, over 1 million Venezuelan immigrants entered Peru, escaping from the totalitarian regime and the great level of poverty that engulfed a once-prosperous nation. For a country like Peru, generally poor and with 30 million inhabitants, this represented a grave social challenge and many forces within the country began to paint negative images of the immigrants, blaming them for all social evils and criminal activity, and thus negating their basic human dignity. As this became a "popular" cause of aspiring politicians and the national media, the Church was challenged to offer another voice based on its long social teaching. This was done in many parts of the country, and we see in the response of Bishop Prevost in Chiclayo a clear perspective of treating immigrants with dignity and solidarity. As many have testified, the "Migrant ministry" established in the diocese and guided by his vision, promoted educational inclusion, helping children and young people to avoid losing school years, and facilitated access to decent jobs, improving the living conditions of many families and offered a place to be received with a roof over their heads as they moved through different parts of the country.²⁸ Human dignity was the guiding principle that the Church promoted to challenge the "enemy" images so popular in the press and political class.

Pope Leo XIV's Papal Teaching:

Obviously, having been Pope for just about one year, there is no large corpus of writings that we can refer to. However, in the documents and speeches given to date, we are able to see the outline of what Pope Leo sees as the Church's contribution to the migrant crisis.

The need to speak out

Pope Leo has been clear that the Church cannot be a bystander or seek a "neutrality" that runs from its basic message because of a reaction in society. The day following the mass of his installation, the new Pope told the gathering of world ambassadors that the Church: *"cannot fail to make its voice heard in the face of the many imbalances and injustices that lead, not least, to unworthy working conditions and increasingly fragmented and conflict-ridden societies."*²⁹ He reaffirmed this later to a group of recently named ambassadors, stating clearly that the Church *"will not be a silent bystander to the grave disparities, injustices and fundamental human rights violations in our human and global community,*

²⁸ There are many personal testimonies of this pastoral action. All are in Spanish. One example: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/119265/la-caricia-de-robert-prevost-a-las-familias-de-inmigrantes-venezolanos-cuando-era-obispo-de-chiclayo>

²⁹ Pope Leo XIV, *Audience to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 16 May 2025.

*which is increasingly more fractured and conflict-prone.”*³⁰ Thus, it is clear that there is an essential role for the Church because Christian faith cannot be limited to a belief that is not concerned with the world.³¹ Indeed, *“the Church can never be exempted from speaking the truth about humanity and the world, resorting whenever necessary to blunt language that may initially create misunderstanding.”*³²

Through its social doctrine, the Church has and must continue to offer *“as a compass for everyone,”*³³ the moral values that allow us to shed a light on the major issues of the day.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is the basic guiding principle of Catholic social thought, precisely because we are created by God in his image and likeness (Gen 1,26-27). This belief influences everything we understand about human beings, particularly those on the peripheries, such as migrants and refugees. The new Pope even tells the story from his personal experience. In his first address to the ambassadors assembled just after his election:

*“...no one is exempted from striving to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly, from the sick to the unemployed, citizens and immigrants alike. My own story is that of a citizen, the descendant of immigrants, who in turn chose to emigrate. All of us, in the course of our lives, can find ourselves healthy or sick, employed or unemployed, living in our native land or in a foreign country, yet our dignity always remains unchanged: it is the dignity of a creature willed and loved by God.”*³⁴

This respect for human dignity is essential, and as he states: *“it is important that there be a growing desire in people’s hearts for a future of peace and of respect for the dignity of all. Such a future is essential to God’s plan for humanity and the rest of creation.”*³⁵

In a speech to the university conference in Rome, *Migrants and Refugees in Our Common Home*, which took place a couple of days before the Jubilee of Migrants, the Pope addressed the participants encouraging them to explore creative solutions to some of the central issues regarding migration: *“I pray that your efforts may bring about new ideas and approaches in this regard, seeking always to put the dignity of every human person at the center of any solution.”*³⁶ Once again, the starting point is treating migrants with human

³⁰ Pope Leo XIV, *Presentation of Credential Letters by Ambassadors*, 6 Dec. 2025

³¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, 112 states: *“we must never forget that religion, especially the Christian religion, cannot be limited to the private sphere, as if believers had no business making their voice heard with regard to problems affecting civil society and issues of concern to its members.”*

³² Pope Leo XIV, *Audience to Members of the Diplomatic Corp.*

³³ Pope Leo XIV, *To the Movements and Associations of the “Arena of Peace”*, 30 May 2025

³⁴ Pope Leo XIV, *Audience to Members of the Diplomatic Corp.*

³⁵ Pope Leo XIV, *Message World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 4 October 2025.

³⁶ Pope Leo XIV, *To Participants in the Meeting “Refugees & Migrants in Our Common Home”*. 2 October 2025.

dignity. He ended his remarks stating: I pray “*you may continue to work towards finding comprehensive solutions to promote a culture of encounter, reconciliation, and fraternal solidarity for the benefit of all.*”³⁷ A culture of encounter is a clear reference to Pope Francis’ position that this is the counterweight to the culture of indifference and to the building of walls rather than bridges.

The lack of concern for human dignity is the great threat that leads to so many other abuses. In his first words as Pope on the Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, Pope Leo underscored this importance, tying them to the Resurrected Christ’s first words “Peace be with you.” “*These words,*” says the Pope, “*are more than a salutation; they offer a path toward a renewed humanity. True peace begins with the recognition and protection of the God-given dignity of every person.*”³⁸

Changing the Imagery

Leo became Pope during the Jubilee Year of 2025, and the first days of October were dedicated to the Jubilee of Migrants. On this occasion, he published his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. The theme of the Message is “*Migrants, missionaries of hope.*”

The word Hope is the backdrop to the entire 2025 Jubilee Year of the Church. Every 25 years, since the first one declared in the year 1300, the Church celebrates a Jubilee year, recalling the biblical practice found in the Mosaic law in the book of Leviticus in the bible, that called for a jubilee year to “*proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants,*” reestablishing justice in the distribution of land.

The prophet Isaiah also speaks of this: “*The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Is 61,1-2) These same words Jesus uses in the gospel of Luke to announce his own mission (Lk 4,16-21). The reference to the “Year of Favor” is to this jubilee year tradition.

Two words make up the central idea of his message on Migrants: Hope and Mission.

The Pope begins by talking about the “hope” that accompanies and indeed motivates all migrants. No one leaves their home, their families, their culture, and society if they don’t have hope of a better tomorrow. Many are forced to leave their homeland because of war, violence, ecological disasters, etc. Others leave for work and better economic conditions. They all leave because they hope that where they are headed will be better. So “hope” is

³⁷ Pope Leo XIV, *To Participants in the Meeting “Refugees & Migrants in Our Common Home”*.

³⁸ Pope Leo XIV, *World Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking*, Feb. 2026.

one of the central motivators of people migrating. That is pretty easy to understand. It's why so many risk so much to come to our shores and to cross our borders.

This is not new; this is, in fact, part of the migrant experience that is as old as humanity itself. The Pope in this document cites the people of Israel in their passing through the desert to the promised land as an example of this search, based on hope, that motivates the present-day migrants.

But there is another aspect of the Pope's message that is not so obvious. Indeed, it is a call of conversion, of a change of mindset. The very migrants, he says, become messengers of hope to the places they head to. Thus, we see how hope motivates them to push forward in the middle of terrible obstacles, and then this great effort becomes a witness for us all. As he states: *"In a world darkened by war and injustice, even when all seems lost, migrants and refugees stand as messengers of hope. Their courage and tenacity bear heroic testimony to a faith that sees beyond what our eyes can see and gives them the strength to defy death on the various contemporary migration routes."*

So, we see their courage and tenacity, we see how hope pushes them forward. But the key is the second part of his words: *"Immigrants and refugees can become missionaries of hope in the countries that welcome them, forging new paths of faith ... Their presence, then, should be recognized and appreciated as a true divine blessing, an opportunity to open oneself to the grace of God, who gives new energy and hope to his Church."*

And he then quotes the letter to the Hebrews in the bible: *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it"* (Heb 13:2).

So, we become blessed by welcoming the migrants as missionaries of hope. We are not only the givers of hope, which we easily can see and understand, but in addition, we are touched and blessed by the immigrants themselves; they give to us the grace of hope. This leads to a change in our way of thinking and seeing; our seeing the migrant crisis as an opportunity for grace.

How different our present political discourse would be if we saw the immigrant in this light, as being for ourselves, missionaries of hope. How would we change, and how would society's treatment of them change, if, in place of the negative images about migrants that we get from the media, we begin to see them, in faith, as messengers of hope?

He also states that the migrants are missionaries of hope because they help to reenergize Christian communities *"where spiritual desertification is advancing at an alarming rate."* Also, they can help initiate *"interreligious dialogue based on everyday life and the search for common values."* The mentioning here of dialogue with others of different faiths is important and, it is one of the central themes the Pope has underscored.

Building the City of God

The second theme of the Migrant document is “Mission”. What is the mission of the Church? What is our mission in the light of the challenging demands of the migrant reality? This brings us to what we quoted earlier about the role of the Church in social questions. We are to provide a moral and ethical compass to guide society. Our faith demands this of us. We are sent by the Lord to transform the world to be more like his kingdom. This is even more the case in the current worldwide migrant crisis. As Pope Leo comments:

“States have the right and the duty to protect their borders, but this should be balanced by the moral obligation to provide refuge. With the abuse of vulnerable migrants, we are witnessing, not the legitimate exercise of national sovereignty, but rather grave crimes committed or tolerated by the state. Ever more inhumane measures are being adopted — even celebrated politically — that treat these ‘undesirables’ as if they were garbage and not human beings. Christianity, on the other hand, refers to the God who is love, who creates us and calls us to live as brothers and sisters.”³⁹

The Church’s moral criterion does not come from any political agenda, nor is it based on fears and insecurities; it does not come from populist speeches or power calculations. Pope Leo is clear that the basis of the moral compass to guide us in the world today is the vision of God’s kingdom, which moves and directs us forward. We must strive to build “a world that increasingly resembles the Kingdom of God.” If we lose that, we become “of” the world and are no longer a Church “in” the world. If we are not “in” the world as a leaven of transformation, then we stop being the pilgrim Church that heads towards, and is directed by, the vision of God’s ultimate embrace of humanity. To fall back, to be guided by something other than God’s vision, is a temptation of every age, and we are not exempt. Indeed, the Pope cites St Paul’s correction of one of his communities to show it is a temptation even of the earliest Christian communities. To the contrary, the Pope says: “*the communities that welcome them [the migrants] can also be a living witness to hope, one that is understood as the promise of a present and a future where the dignity of all as children of God is recognized.*”

That is the challenge. How do we have policies that fulfill a promise where the dignity of all is recognized? How do we ensure, in his words, “*the pursuit of the common good and global solidarity for the benefit of our entire human family.*” We are constantly reminded about this challenge by the migrant experience of the Holy Family:

“Mary and Joseph flee with the child Jesus to Egypt. Christ himself, who ‘came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’ (Jn 1:11), lived among us as a stranger. For this reason, the Church has always recognized in migrants a living presence of the Lord

³⁹ Pope Leo XIV, *To Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements*.

*who, on the day of judgment, will say to those on his right: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Mt 25:35)."*⁴⁰

The building of bridges

Pope Francis often spoke about building bridges rather than walls as a metaphor for accepting migrants. Pope Leo also uses the same metaphor. To a meeting of Catholic Charities, he sent a message saying:

*"It might be said that through assisting displaced persons to find their new homes in your country, you also act as bridge builders between nations, cultures and peoples. I encourage you, then, to continue helping the communities who receive these newly arrived brothers and sisters to be living witnesses of hope, recognizing that they have an intrinsic human dignity and are invited to participate fully in community life."*⁴¹

Helping the world move closer to the reality of a more fraternal society, through dialogue and respect, can be summarized in the Pope's call for building bridges that he enunciated in his first remarks the day of his election: *"to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."* In fact, this metaphor is repeated throughout his teachings and becomes one of the keys to our understanding his vision of Church and its social teachings.⁴²

Seeing reality (opening eyes and ears)

Pope Francis referred to hearing the cry of the poor and the migrants. In his homily on the occasion of the Jubilee of Migrants, Pope Leo shows that their stories continue to inspire and make us question. They put a human face onto what could otherwise be mere statistics:

"Today, the frontiers of the missions are no longer geographical, because poverty, suffering and the desire for a greater hope have made their way to us. The story of so many of our migrant brothers and sisters bears witness to this: the tragedy of their flight from violence, the suffering which accompanies it, the fear of not succeeding, the perilous risk of traveling along the coastline, their cry of sorrow and desperation. Brothers and sisters, those boats

⁴⁰ Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, 73.

⁴¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Message to the 115th Annual Meeting of the Catholic Charities USA Network*, 2025.

⁴² In his remarks to the Diplomatic Corp he expresses the hope *"to build new bridges with all people of good will."* In his Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, he says educational communities do *"not build walls, but bridges,"* In his comments to the Members of Centesimus Annus Foundation, he states that the purpose of the Church's social doctrine is to make *"a contribution to peace and dialogue in the service of building bridges of universal fraternity."* In his first Apostolic Visit to Turkey the bridge over the Dardanelles Strait, was chosen as the logo for his journey. In remarks commemorating the 60th anniversary of the document of Vatican II on interreligious dialogue *Nostra Aetate* he comments: *"to walk together in hope. Then, when we do so, something beautiful happens: hearts open, bridges are built and new paths appear where none seemed possible."*

*which hope to catch sight of a safe port, and those eyes filled with anguish and hope seeking to reach the shore, cannot and must not find the coldness of indifference or the stigma of discrimination!”*⁴³

Prayer and Action

Pope Leo ties treatment of the poor to the liturgical life of the faith community, stating: *“The Eucharist opens us to justice and sharing, with a preferential concern for those who are burdened by poverty or marginalization.”*⁴⁴ This is something he repeated to the migrants themselves whom he visited in the Canary Islands as part of his pastoral visit to Spain: *“Welcoming migrants cannot be a secondary matter that is left to a few volunteers. We kneel before the altar to adore Christ present in the Eucharist, from whom we receive the strength and the motivation to live charity; for this reason, we cannot then “pass by” the small boats and rafts, for all service and every commitment spring from prayer and lead back to it (cf. Lk 10:31-32).”*⁴⁵

Hearing the cry of the poor, pushes the Church toward action. This was emphasized as he spoke to migrants and groups working on their behalf in his visit to the Canary Islands: *“The Church cannot ignore these waters or any place where hunger, thirst, violence, fear or exile continue to wound human dignity. Jesus’ disciples cannot dismiss the cries of those who call out in the night.”*⁴⁶

Litmus Test of Faith

This is underscored with several reflections found in MH as well as his apostolic visit to Spain where he traveled specifically to the Canary Islands precisely to address the issue of migrants and refugees. In MH he says that: *“A litmus test for social justice today is the treatment of migrants, refugees and those forced to move due to poverty, violence, climate change and environmental disasters. The way a society treats them reveals whether its sense of justice is driven by fear or by the spirit of fraternity.”*⁴⁷ Two things are emphasized by the Pope, first the moral obligation of *“ensuring safe and legal routes, dignified conditions for receiving them [migrants], and genuine pathways to integration.”* And secondly what is often called the “right not to migrate,” which means helping to address the conditions in many countries *“that force people to migrate, including those linked to economic injustices and the climate crisis.”* This is the most definitive way of addressing

⁴³ Pope Leo XIV, *Homily on the occasion of the Jubilee for Migrants*, 5 October 2025.

⁴⁴ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 235.

⁴⁵ Pope Leo XIV, Remarks at Port of Arguineguín (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), 11 June 2026

⁴⁶ Pope Leo XIV, Remarks at Port of Arguineguín (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), 11 June 2026

⁴⁷ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 81.

the modern phenomenon of migration since it seeks to address the causes and motivations of those forced to migrate.

In the Canary Islands, the Pope spoke forcefully about human dignity and migrants, since *“Human dignity has no passport and does not lose its value when crossing a border.”*⁴⁸ First he spoke directly to the migrants: *“Dear migrants, before saying anything else to you, I want to bow before your dignity. You are not just numbers or files. You are people who have left behind families and homes. You have dreams that no one has the right to despise.”* Then he appealed *“to the conscience”* of all nations, especially in Europe *“which cannot claim to uphold human dignity while growing accustomed to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic becoming unmarked graves.”* This appeal to conscience he made the next day in his visit to the island of Tenerife: *“A human conscience, and even more so a Christian conscience, cannot remain indifferent in the face of these graveyards of the sea, to the victims of shipwrecks and the lack of aid. Every life lost on these routes is a failure for the human family. Nevertheless, there is also a silent shipwreck that occurs after arrival: being left alone in a city, without a voice, without ties, work or a sense of security, and exposed to those who take advantage of vulnerability. Integration means preventing that second shipwreck.”*⁴⁹ It is the metaphor of the “shipwreck” that brings together the themes the Pope spoke of on this special visit. For in the shipwrecks crossing the sea, we see the human tragedy of the conditions in their lands of birth that pushed them out to seek something more dignified. It is the walls that nations put up against them that lead to the perilous journeys that result in the “unmarked graves” at sea, and it is the antagonism that those who reach new shores often face that makes a second “shipwreck” a sin.

Finally, in both of these speeches on the Canary Island he raised the judgement of God to illuminate the sinful situation that the migrants face. On the Island of Gran Canaria, he said: *“May the God who, in the evening of life, will judge us on our love grant us the grace to recognize him today in the poor and in foreigners, and free us from viewing the suffering of others as if it did not concern us.”* And in Tenerife he raised his voice, something he seldom does, in judgement against the merchants of suffering: *“I wish to address a clear message to those who take advantage of people’s desperation, to those who organize death routes, traffic in human beings, withhold documents, exploit workers, threaten women, deceive families and turn the suffering of others into a business. Stop. Repent. The tears and blood of these brothers and sisters cry out to God, and their suffering reaches him. The money wrested from the vulnerability of the poor will bring neither peace, nor honor, nor a future. For every life lost, every family deceived, every body subjugated, every woman threatened,*

⁴⁸ Pope Leo XIV, Remarks at Port of Arguineguín (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), 11 June 2026

⁴⁹ Pope Leo XIV Remarks in the "Plaza del Cristo de La Laguna" Tenerife, Canary Islands, June 12, 2026

every worker exploited, you will have to appear before divine justice. Break those chains and free those you hold in bondage...Repent while there is still time, for God's mercy can reach even the most hardened sinner, but it enters only through the narrow gate of truth, justice and conversion."

The antidote to this tragedy, to *"fear that fuels prejudice and contempt; the belief that such problems do not concern us,"* is the *"dynamic of compassion and mercy."* *"To pause, to be moved, to bend down, to weep before another's pain — as Jesus did — means entering into the dynamic of love, the very movement in which God has revealed himself."*⁵⁰

Conclusion Pope Leo XIV

In his first social document, Pope Leo stated: *"the Church, like a mother, accompanies those who are walking. Where the world sees threats, she sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community."*⁵¹ This citation summarizes various aspects of Pope Leo's teaching about migrants, namely, to see them in their full dignity as children of God; the need to welcome and accompany them; to see the very presence of Christ in their suffering faces; and the need to respond by building bridges and not walls.

C) The United States Bishops' Teaching

In his document *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action), Pope Paul VI emphasized the need for local communities to address specific issues and problems, not hoping that the universal Church could possibly address everything around the world (OA, 4). Certainly, as seen above, the Popes, speaking for the Universal Church, have given specific guiding principles in their development of Catholic Social teaching, which is applicable everywhere. However, the bishops of different regions need to respond to their specific circumstances. In this role the American bishops⁵² have spoken on various occasions regarding the treatment of migrants and refugees in the United States. Based on these documents, we can highlight some of the moral criteria addressed to the specifically American (US) situation.

⁵⁰ Pope Leo XIV, Homily in Lampedusa, 4 July 2026

⁵¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, 75.

⁵² Each country has its own group of bishops. In the United States it is called the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) which brings together all the bishops in the US in one umbrella organization in order to speak with one voice in name of the entire Church in the US.

As is obvious from the papal statements, the very reason the Church feels compelled to speak on this issue is because of the mandate given by its faith in Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in all of Holy Scripture. This they briefly summarize:

*“The Church’s teaching rests on the foundational concern for the human person, as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). As pastors, we look to Sacred Scripture and the example of the Lord Himself, where we find the wisdom of God’s compassion. The priority of the Lord, as the Prophets remind us, is for those who are most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger (Zechariah 7:10). In the Lord Jesus, we see the One who became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9), we see the Good Samaritan who lifts us from the dust (Luke 10:30–37), and we see the One who is found in the least of these (Matthew 25). The Church’s concern for neighbor and our concern here for immigrants is a response to the Lord’s command to love as He has loved us (John 13:34).”*⁵³

This citation begins with the same principle seen as the foundational building block of papal teaching, namely the dignity of the human person based on the fact that each one is made in the image and likeness of God. This gives to each person a dignity that does not depend on a particular government or law, rather it is based on the very nature of the person created by God.

Contrary to many who claim that the Church is advocating for “open borders” without restrictions, and thus lives in a utopian bubble, the bishops make clear that the social teaching of the Church recognizes the right of a nation to its security and to set policies regarding immigration and its borders. However, it is likewise clear that this is not an absolute right, in the sense that any and all policies are justified or morally acceptable. There is a fundamental condition that must be respected, namely that of human dignity. As they remark: *“While the Church recognizes the legitimate authority of sovereign nations to regulate immigration and secure their borders, the Church also teaches that this authority includes a corresponding duty to protect the God-given dignity of every human person.”*⁵⁴ In light of this basic principle, the bishops have felt the need to publicly speak against some of the policies now being applied in the country. As they declared:

“We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. ...We are grieved when we meet parents who fear being detained when taking their children to school and when we try to

⁵³ USCCB, “*Special Message*” on Immigration from Plenary Assembly in Baltimore, 12 Nov. 2025. It is not common for the bishops to speak in this way. The last time the whole body issued a statement was in 2013. For further biblical references see USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*, Feb. 2026.

⁵⁴ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.

*console family members who have already been separated from their loved ones....we feel compelled now in this environment to raise our voices in defense of God-given human dignity.”*⁵⁵

Similar to what we saw in the papal teaching about “the other”, the American bishops likewise affirm: *“the Church rejects the notion that some people are considered ‘others’ and do not possess intrinsic God-given human dignity. As Pope Francis explained, every person ‘reflects something of God’s glory’.”*⁵⁶

Based on this principle, namely *“that equal human dignity is inherent in the mere fact of personhood and does not depend on citizenship, immigration status, or parentage”*⁵⁷, the bishops insist on a *“firmly held belief that each person is endowed by God with an inherent dignity that confers certain universal, inviolable, and inalienable rights”*⁵⁸. Several criticisms are given to the present immigration situation in the country, some of which are considered *“immoral and contrary to the Catholic Church’s fundamental beliefs and teachings regarding the life and dignity of human persons”*⁵⁹:

i) The bishops *“oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people,”*⁶⁰ which often is carried out without the due process guarantees that are part of the American legal tradition. Rather, *“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,”*⁶¹ instead of toward law-abiding people.

ii) They raise an alarm about the *“dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement,”* creating a *“climate of fear and anxiety and the vilification of immigrants that is all too common in the rhetoric concerning immigration policy.”*⁶²

iii) Regarding detention, they acclaim: *“Just enforcement also requires limiting the use of detention, especially for families, children, pregnant women, the sick, elderly, and disabled.”*⁶³ The family is the basic social structure to which each person is connected,

⁵⁵ USCCB, *“Special Message” on Immigration from Plenary Assembly in Baltimore.*

⁵⁶ USCCB, *Amicus brief.* Cites Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 274.

⁵⁷ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship.*

⁵⁸ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship.*

⁵⁹ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship.*

⁶⁰ USCCB, *“Special Message” on Immigration from Plenary Assembly in Baltimore.*

⁶¹ USCCB, *“Catholic Elements of Immigration Reform”.* Jan. 2025.

⁶² USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship.*

⁶³ USCCB, *“Catholic Elements of Immigration Reform”.*

*“the first and vital cell of society,”*⁶⁴ therefore, the Church *“consistently rejects state actions that undermine family integrity,”*⁶⁵ such as family separation.

iv) The bishops also strongly oppose attempts to eliminate or restrict birthright citizenship, which was put into the American Constitution with the 14th Amendment, and grants citizenship to everyone born in the United States. More than a legal interpretation on the meaning of certain words in the amendment, the bishops submitted to the Supreme Court a declaration stating: *“At its core, this case is not solely a question about citizenship status or the Fourteenth Amendment. It is a question of whether the law will affirm or deny the equal worth of those born within our common community—whether the law will protect the human dignity of all God’s children.”*⁶⁶

In their Amicus brief, the bishops argued in favor of birthright citizenship as a moral imperative because of two fundamental principles of Catholic Social thought. The first and most obvious was based on human dignity. They state clearly *“that political authority is morally bound to affirm and protect the inherent dignity of every human person in the community,”*⁶⁷ and that denying citizenship to those born in the country based on the immigration status of their parents violates this basic norm.

The second argument is based on the principle of subsidiarity. This is a principle of Catholic Social thought ever since it was first explicitly raised by Pope Pius XI in 1931 (*Quadragesimo anno*, 79) and repeated in every Catholic social document ever since. It is based on the decentralization of power and how the state should protect and promote the lowest levels of social authority (the family being the most basic), rather than assume all the power itself. In their brief, the bishops argue that respect for this principle means that everyone should be able to participate in the social and civic life of their community. In denying birthright citizenship, there would be many “stateless” people, who have no nationality and thus would be denied this basic social and civic involvement. *“Through this lens, social participation is not a discretionary benefit conferred by the state, but a fundamental right inherent in the very fact of being human.”*⁶⁸ Based on this principle, the bishops conclude that attempts to eliminate birthright citizenship are *“antithetical to the import of the Church’s teachings because it deprives people whose parents were not born*

⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 42, 1981.

⁶⁵ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.

⁶⁶ The US Supreme Court on April 1, 2026, heard arguments regarding birthright citizenship. The Church submitted to the court an Amicus brief against an executive order limiting this right of citizenship. An amicus brief (Latin for “friend of the court”) is a legal document filed in the Supreme Court by non-parties in the case, but who have a strong interest in the outcome and wish for the Court to consider their perspectives. The bishops submit such briefs with some frequency when the issue concerns something related to moral considerations.

⁶⁷ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.

⁶⁸ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.

*here, or whose mother has temporary status, of the legal rights necessary to participate in the society of their birth.”*⁶⁹

v) Solidarity.

The word “solidarity,” one of the core values of Catholic Social thought is not mentioned specifically in the Amicus brief, however its basic principle is clearly present as one of the challenges in building a humane immigration policy. As they state:

*“It is critical that we treat our suffering neighbors not with indifference, apathy, or bias, but instead with the same type of mercy as depicted in the story of the Good Samaritan, whose love transcended the most strident ethnic division of that day. See Luke 10:33–37. Christ’s very point in framing a Samaritan as that story’s hero was to emphasize that our obligation to love our neighbors who are suffering is not bounded by regional or cultural borders.”*⁷⁰

General Conclusion

In looking at the Church’s teaching regarding migrants and refugees from the perspectives of Popes Francis and Leo XIV, as well as from the US bishops, we can see that certain criteria need to be followed to ensure that immigration policy is moral. Here we have laid out what those criteria are, and how they serve as a light of judgment upon present national policies, and at the same time provide a direction in how to build a more just and compassionate immigration policy.

⁶⁹ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.

⁷⁰ USCCB, *Amicus brief against the negation of birthright citizenship*.