



Immigration

Position Statement of the National Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul



A Message from Our President

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,

Vincentians, modeling their lives and service after the teaching of the Gospel which calls us to see Jesus in the poor and needy wherever they may be found, serve many immigrants.

In the Old Testament, God told Moses, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God." (*Leviticus 19:33-34*)

This position paper addresses the urgent need for Immigration Reform. Reform is long overdue. Its lack causes millions of undocumented immigrants already in the United States to suffer senseless, grinding poverty. This situation is an affront to the American people's sense of compassion and justice.

Our position bases itself on love of neighbor, the principles of our Catholic faith, and the rich tradition and noble history of our country as a land of opportunity and refuge for migrants. Those are the tenets which should guide our public policy on this important matter, with no concessions to politics and ideology.

Yours in Christ,

*Sheila Gilbert,
President*

National Council of the United States Society of St. Vincent de Paul

In the Mediterranean Sea off the island of Lampedusa, two shipwreck tragedies in October 2013 resulted in the death of about 400 migrants fleeing North Africa to Europe for safety and opportunity. Six months later on April 1, 2014, at a Mass on the Mexico/US Border for migrants on this continent, [Cardinal Sean O'Malley's homily](#) quoted the preaching of Pope Francis at Lampedusa about the "...globalization of indifference... We have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We have fallen into the hypocrisy of the Priest and Levite whom Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan: we see our brother half dead on the side of the road and perhaps we say to ourselves, 'Poor soul' and then go our way. It is not our responsibility, and with that we feel reassured, assuaged. The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people."

Living the Social Gospel of Immigration

Just as on the road to Emmaus, Christ's disciples met him in the guise of a stranger ([Luke 24:13-35](#)), Christ makes himself present to each of us in the traveler, the newcomer, and the immigrant. As Catholics, we are inspired by the rich body of Church teaching, rooted in Biblical tradition, and we recognize our moral obligation to "Welcome the Stranger", as we would welcome Christ himself.

Vincentians open their hearts and provide assistance, welcoming and accepting the immigrant, who is far away from home and in a vulnerable situation.

For years, in cooperation with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Society has taken every opportunity to ask Congress to implement Comprehensive Immigration Reform to replace the current outdated system, which does not meet the economic needs of our country, nor the needs of the people migrating.

With our voices, we represent the immigrant families who have no voice. Immigration is, first, a moral issue, and then an economic or political issue.



The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Supports Common Sense Immigration Policies that Reflect Guiding Principles of our Faith and of our Country

THE SOCIETY SUPPORTS IMMIGRATION REFORM LEGISLATION THAT:

- **Provides a compassionate and dignified path to citizenship for undocumented persons in the country**

"We need a strong and clear immigration policy. It must serve our country's security and prosperity and at the same time be based on the moral values on which all our lives must ultimately rest. We must never forget the Gospel call of Jesus 'to welcome the stranger' for in the face of this stranger, we see the face of Christ." (His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, former Archbishop of Washington, Editorial in the Catholic Standard, To be Clear, June 2, 2005)

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me. ..." (Mathew 25:35-36)

- **Preserves family unity as a fundamental cornerstone of our national immigration system**

"The institution of the family is deeply rooted in this nation, and receives constitutional protection. Promoting family stability, moreover, remains a modern goal, as evidenced by current federal law and modern empirical research. Family stability is a goal shared by many, including the Catholic Church, which views families as the building blocks of society and recognizes the special need that immigrants have for their families." ([U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Amicus Brief in the case of Arizona v. United States: p. 7 – March 26, 2012](#))

- **Provides a legal path for low-skilled immigrants to come and work in the United States**

"The reality is that our current system is immoral. While many may condemn the presence of the undocumented in our land, we willingly accept their hard labor, their contributions to our economy, and their cultural and religious spirit, which enriches our local communities. While we accept these contributions, we do so at the expense of the human beings, who come here not to harm us, but to help us. They are often ridiculed, exploited, and abused. This must stop, and this immoral system must be changed." (Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn, Statement at the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, October 4, 2003)

- **Restores due process protections to our immigration enforcement policies**

"In order to achieve real reform, the Administration and Congress must work together on a comprehensive package. This would legalize undocumented migrants and their families in the U.S., provide legal means for migrants to enter our nation to work and support their families, and reform the system whereby immigrants come to the United States to be reunited with close family members. We also must restore due process protections to immigrants, many of which were taken away under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996." ([Statement by Gerald F. Kicanas, Bishop of Tucson, Arizona, before the House Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, February 11, 2015](#))

- **Addresses the root causes of migration, such as persecution and economic disparity.**

"Every human being has the right to freedom of movement within the confines of his own country. When conditions are unbearable, he must have the right to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of citizenship in the universal society, the worldwide fellowship of men." (John Paul II, Address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants - October 17, 1985)

The suffering caused by poverty, food insecurity, violent conflicts, persecution, and environmental destruction prompts individuals to leave their homes in search of safety and a better life. Our faith compels us to reduce the need for people to leave their homes

The United States should promote sustainable development by implementing more just foreign assistance and trade policies. Investment in such development provides alternatives to migration for individuals seeking safe and secure futures for their families. It would also reduce the need for costly border enforcement, detention, and deportation estimated at almost \$18 billion in 2012.

Immigration reform will not be effective nor truly comprehensive until the U.S. Congress addresses the underlying causes that drive people from their homes.



Frequently Asked Questions for the **Immigration Position Paper** **The Society of St. Vincent de Paul**

WHAT DOES OUR CATHOLIC FAITH TRADITION TEACH ABOUT IMMIGRATION?

In the [2003 Pastoral Letter concerning immigration, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope"](#), the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States affirm that:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities that will allow them to live in dignity in their homeland
2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families if they are unable to do so in their own countries
3. Nations have the right to control their borders
4. Refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution should be afforded protection by the international community
5. The dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be protected
6. Family unity among immigrant families should be protected and upheld
7. Our traditions call on us to welcome the stranger among us

WHAT DO OTHER FAITH TRADITIONS TEACH ABOUT IMMIGRATION?

At a Multi-Faith Border Conference in Tucson, AZ (3/18/2004) and at the Arizona Interfaith Network Convocation on Immigration in Phoenix, AZ (4/19/2004), clergy of several faith developed the following common principles or affirmations. They stated that these “emerge from our faith traditions and teachings, and may serve to guide our thinking and action around migration and immigration issues.”

First Principle: All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, religious and social opportunities to live in dignity, provide for their families, and achieve a full life.

Second Principle: Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families if they are unable to do so in their own countries.

These two Principles recognize that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to migrate elsewhere to find work in order to survive. Our traditions also recognize the right of sovereign nations to control their territories and impose reasonable limits on immigration. In the current conditions of widespread global poverty and persecution, however, the more powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their own residents, have an obligation to accommodate migration flows whenever possible.

Third Principle: Those fleeing violence and persecution should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution, as many people from our own faith traditions have been forced to do throughout history, need protection by the global community. This requires that we allow migrants to claim refugee status and to have their asylum claims fully considered by a competent authority.

Fourth Principle: The human dignity and human rights of all migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, immigrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. As such, they must not be subjected to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers in the receiving or transit countries, nor be subjected to exploitation by employers. We must seek policies to safeguard the rights and inherent dignity of all immigrants, particularly the undocumented, including their rights as workers.

Fifth Principle: Family unity among migrant and immigrant families should be protected and upheld.

Our faith traditions are also deeply rooted in the sanctity of the family. As such, we are concerned that all efforts be made to allow immigrants to be reunited with their families in a safe and legal manner.

Sixth Principle: Our traditions call on us to welcome the stranger among us.

All of our faith traditions and teachings promote hospitality towards all people, including the immigrant, the refugees, and the exiled in our communities.

WHAT DOES OUR CIVIL TRADITION TEACH US ABOUT IMMIGRATION?

To its inestimable credit and benefit, the United States has been a beacon of hope to the downtrodden since its inception. Let us not forget this as one of our sources of greatness, and let us remember the powerful central message of our Declaration of Independence and the quote on the Statue of Liberty which enshrines this heritage.

FROM THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

"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."

ON THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me;
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

ISN'T THIS QUESTION VERY SIMPLE? UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS ARE HERE ILLEGALLY – END OF DISCUSSION!

Many people believe that breaking the law is inexcusable and that anyone doing it deserves harsh punishment, such as deportation.

What if our immigration laws are wrong, unjust, or unworkable? What if they do not meet the needs of our economy nor those of the immigrants? What if they violate the principles of our Catholic faith, social teaching and tradition?

Think about other times and places: was it right for people to follow the US slavery laws, or the Anti-Jewish laws in Nazi Germany, just because they were laws?

Consider this reflection from Embracing Conversion - Reflections for Lent 2001 - Pax Christi USA

“Joseph was an honest person. He earned his livelihood by carpentry. He was loyal, trustworthy and just. We can assume, as an honorable Jew, that Joseph faithfully followed the Law of Moses.

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant during their engagement but before they lived together, he was “unwilling to expose her to the law.” He decided to divorce her quietly.

Although a dedicated follower of the law, apparently Joseph was not rigid, dogmatic or absolute in his adherence to it. The law, he realized, must be tempered with kindness, interpreted with love, and superseded by a higher law when necessary.

Sometimes, like Joseph, we need to circumvent the letter of the law to live its spirit. Sometimes we must go around to the back door when a law keeps the front door locked. Sometimes the human law stifles God’s divine law of love. Sometimes we may be called upon to examine a law and challenge it, if it is unjust.”

The US Bishops speak plainly about the need for Immigration Reform. This statement by Reverend Thomas Wenski, Archbishop of Miami, is to the point:

“The so-called illegals are so not because they wish to defy the law; but, because the law does not provide them with any channels to regularize their status in our country, which needs their labor: they are not breaking the law, the law is breaking them.”

Reverend Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn, says:

“The reality is that our current system is immoral. While many may condemn the presence of the undocumented in our land, we willingly accept their hard labor, their contributions to our economy, and their cultural and religious spirit, which enriches our local communities. While we accept these contributions, we do so at the expense of the human beings, who come here not to harm us but to help us. They are often ridiculed, exploited, and abused. This must stop, and this immoral system must be changed.”

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISINFORMATION ABOUT IMMIGRATION THAT CAUSE CONFLICT IN RESOLVING THIS ISSUE?

Common Belief	The Reality
Undocumented immigrants are a drain on US economy	Immigrants contribute to the economy in proportion to their share of the population (see Fiscal Policy Institute’s December 2009 study: “Immigrants and the Economy”)

Common Belief	The Reality
Undocumented immigrants are taking jobs away from citizens.	Both skilled and unskilled workers boost US employment (see America Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research’s December 2011 study: “Immigration and American Jobs”)
Border enforcement has decreased the number of undocumented immigrants.	The decrease of immigration from Mexico is due to demographic changes and a better economy in that country. Undocumented immigrants now come in larger numbers from Central America. The increase in enforcement budget and number of border agents has pushed border crossers into extremely remote and dangerous areas resulting in more than 400 deaths every year.
We need more border enforcement.	Border enforcement, without reasonable immigration laws, is a failed policy. A system that allows safe, legal, orderly immigration for those coming for work or to reunite with their families will leave in the shadows only those who have something to hide – criminals, drug dealers and smugglers. Border agents should be looking for these people.
Restriction of immigration and deportation are good for the US economy.	With increases in low-skilled immigration, the U.S. economy would expand, creating more jobs in higher-skilled areas. Over time, some U.S. workers now in low-paying jobs would move up the occupational ladder. (See Dixon and Rimmer, Restriction of Legalization? Measuring the Economic Benefits of Immigration Reform. CATO Institute, August 13, 2009)
We have an immigration system. Let those who want to immigrate get in line and follow the system.	The current system is so restrictive that it allows in only skilled workers or foreigners joining family members legally in the US; for the latter, the process takes anywhere from 7 years (for a spouse) to 28 years to complete (for a sibling). How can anyone wait that long?

WE DO HAVE AN IMMIGRATION SYSTEM! WHY DON’T IMMIGRANTS FOLLOW IT?

How much do we know about the Immigration system? Unless we had to navigate through it personally, or helped someone do it, probably very little. Research and experience shows it is a very complex system, which tends to answer “no” more readily than “yes”, as one tries to make his or her way through the labyrinth.

In the best case scenario, involving parents, spouses or minor children of a United States Citizen, the total time to immigrate and become a citizen is **six to seven years**, but:

- For siblings and adult children of a United States Citizen, the total time to immigrate and become a citizen is **twelve to twenty-eight years**.
- For spouses or minor children of a lawful permanent resident in the United States, the total time to immigrate and become a citizen is **ten to thirteen years**.
- For single adult children of a lawful permanent resident in the United States, the total time to immigrate and become a citizen is **fourteen to twenty years**.

- For skilled workers with a college degree and with an offer from an employer willing to file the paperwork and labor certification at a cost of at least \$10,000 in legal and other fees, the total time to immigrate and become a citizen is **eleven to sixteen years**.

How long can we ask a father to wait to offer his family a future? How can we tell a mother that she must wait 10 years to reunite with her husband or children? Can employers wait so many years to hire a needed professional?

That is the reason why so many cross the border undocumented or overstay their visa.

For more information about the complexities and delays of our legal immigration system, see the flow chart entitled [“What Part of Legal Immigration Don’t You Understand?” developed by Reason Foundation in collaboration with the National Foundation for American Policy.](#)

WHEN DID WE LAST ENACT NEW IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION?

Thirty (30) years ago! The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act signed by President Reagan generously granted amnesty to more than 3 million immigrant workers. Unfortunately, the Act did nothing to improve the system going forward and did not have any realistic provisions for meeting future labor needs through temporary visas, nor a mechanism for enforcement of employment laws.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EXECUTIVE ACTION AND IMMIGRATION REFORM?

Executive Action consists of instructions given by the President to the Executive Branch of Government on how to apply current legislation. For Comprehensive Immigration Reform, Congress has to enact new legislation.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT HAVING UPDATED OUR IMMIGRATION SYSTEM FOR DECADES?

They are many, negative, and not in accord with Catholic Social Teaching. Here are some of the major adverse consequences.

➤ ***Billions spent on border enforcement have not reduced the flow of unauthorized immigrants!***

Years of inaction have built the unauthorized population to 11.7 million by the end of 2013, as US industries (agriculture, construction, hospitality, etc.) continue to need low skilled workers (the so-called “pull” factors) and as the violence and lack of opportunities for people and families from Mexico first and now Central America forced them to migrate north to the United States (the so-called “push” factors).

To respond to the surge in immigration, the basic United States policy has been to fund more border enforcement. The budget for border enforcement went from \$9.2 billion in 2003 to \$17.8 billion in 2013, much of it to add active Border Patrol Agents in service at the border.

Yet, despite the increased border enforcement, the number of undocumented immigrants went from 3.5 million in 1990 to over 12.2 million in 2008. Then, because of the economic downturn in the US at that time, it slightly decreased but is now increasing again. Obviously, increased enforcement is not the answer since it is not working.

➤ **Unauthorized Immigrants are a growing underclass!**

- These individuals are forced to live in the shadows for fear of deportation. This outcome conflicts directly with two Foundational Principles of Catholic Social Teaching – that of Association and Participation.
- These individuals must work unofficially and some secure fake Social Security numbers, making them vulnerable to unscrupulous employers and nefarious employment schemes.
- Afraid to be found and deported by police, these individuals typically do not report crimes, thereby involuntarily making the criminals stronger and less likely to be apprehended and simultaneously weakening the safety of our communities.

From Catholic Social Teaching

The Principle of Association

Our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society in economics and politics, in law and in policy, directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

The Principle of Participation

We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected.

➤ **Prevention through deterrence has caused at least thousands of deaths!**

The construction of walls at high-traffic crossing areas, like San Diego and El Paso, called “prevention through deterrence”, forced undocumented immigrants to come through the Arizonan-Sonoran Desert, a long and extremely dangerous journey.

There have been 2,269 deaths (1999-2012) in the Arizona Desert alone, in spite of efforts by local humanitarian groups to assist migrants along the way with food, water and medical care, where possible.

Those counted were just the recovered bodies. Hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, are still to be found. Most are children and parents. They die from fatigue, injury, dehydration, and hypothermia. In the summer, the air in the barren landscape reaches 120 degrees and the ground temperature 150 degrees or more and can cook the muscular system. In the winter, the temperature can drop below freezing.

➤ **Children are traveling alone to the border at their own great peril to escape the violence in Central America and Mexico!**

Children come either to escape violence or to rejoin their family already in the US. In a 2014 Action Alert, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul strongly opposed the rollback of the existing protections afforded to the Central American children and instead requested that Mexican children also receive the same protection. The Society urged that US policy also provide:

- ✓ Legal counsel and adequate decision time for all unaccompanied children.
- ✓ Community-based alternatives to detention programs. These are more cost effective and humane than the failed practice of family detention.
- ✓ Funding for adequate humanitarian services for both these children and other refugees under the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.
- ✓ It is inhumane and immoral that families and children who are fleeing violence often find only prison and uncertain detention as they arrive at our border.

➤ ***Our US policies are resulting in increased numbers of the poor and vulnerable being deported!***

The number of immigrants officially removed from the US has increased steeply since 2005, due to the Federal “fast track” legal process called “Operation Streamline”, a mock collective trial, under a zero tolerance approach. With Operation Streamline, hundreds of immigrants go through collective hearings every week. According to a study by the University of Detroit Law School, Operation Streamline:

- ✓ violates the due process clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments
- ✓ violates defendants’ Sixth Amendment right of effective assistance of counsel
- ✓ diverts important resources away from prosecuting more serious crimes
- ✓ does not have the strong deterrent effect its advocates hoped
- ✓ enriches private prison companies that hold immigrants for months before the trial, with taxpayer money

Deportations have separated many families with mixed status or nationality, with no legal way to reunite again.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ELIMINATE THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION?

The Interfaith Migration Coalition offers these actions for our country to take to reduce the need for people to leave their homes:

- Support policies and programs that invest in sustainable development in immigrant-sending countries
- Reshape U.S. trade and foreign policies to promote investment in immigrant-sending countries
- Reshape international financial institutions to promote economic opportunity for the poor and marginalized in immigration-sending countries
- Include policies to address root causes in any immigration reform bill

WE OFTEN HEAR ABOUT “PUSH FACTORS” AND “PULL FACTORS”. WHAT ARE THEY?

“Push” factors

- Just as in biblical times, people leave their homes to avoid violent conflict (e.g. cartel violence in Mexico and gang violence in Central America), natural disasters, and economic distress

“Pull” factors

- People are drawn to the U.S. for economic opportunity, safety, and to reunite with family members
- Abundant opportunities to work in agriculture in particular are a draw for many immigrants; by some estimates, 60% of U.S. agricultural workers are undocumented immigrants