

“Welcoming and Integrating Immigrants: Everyone Wins”
Talk for the Annual Catholic Immigrant Integration Initiative Conference
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Introduction

“Each migrant has a name, a face and a story,” once noted Pope Francis, and behind every immigrant story is a very real, very moving, and sometimes tragic human experience. Immigration is an issue that perhaps more than any other looks very different when one puts a human face to it. When immigrants are no longer seen as merely a danger to others or threats to the local community but instead as persons, our feelings of animosity can morph into feelings of love and concern. As Catholics, we are called not only to “know” the stranger through the stranger’s stories but to welcome the stranger as Christ himself, for Christ reveals himself to us through them: “I was ... a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). An essential component of our role in welcoming the stranger is to place special attention on integration – uplifting the newcomer to help him or her reach full and dignified participation in our Church and society.

It is the personal encounter that can humanize what might otherwise remain distant and abstract. I’ve always known this, but it became abundantly clear to me in a very personal way when I visited the home of Hugo Mejia and his family a little over a year ago. When going to work at a construction site on a military base, he and a coworker were handcuffed and taken to an immigration detention facility 100 miles away. As I visited and prayed with Hugo’s family, their anguish at the separation was palpable – but so was their dignity and the power of their faith in the face of such great hardship.

During my visit, Hugo called his family from inside the immigration detention facility. I felt how much he missed his wife, Yadira, and their three children. As his voice echoed over the phone, I understood how important his family was to him. Hugo is a devoted husband and father, church-goer, and construction worker. He volunteers at his children’s school and is a member of the Painters’ Union. Hugo’s labor advances an industry that has created great wealth – mostly for others. The detention of someone with a desire to forge deep roots in the community is a call for all of us to look beyond heated rhetoric, to see the humanity of the most vulnerable members of our communities, and to help them to succeed.

Some weeks after my visit, Hugo had his hearing before an immigration judge on whether he would be allowed to be released on bail until his case could be finally decided. The judge had to determine whether or not Hugo was a flight risk. I was one of a few guests allowed inside the

hearing room with the family. Hugo appeared on a screen from inside the detention facility, making his case, explaining why his life would be in peril if he had to return to his hometown in Mexico. The tension in the room was almost unbearable; I was quietly praying constantly. Here, the fate of this family was hanging in the balance, all hanging on a “yea” or a “nay” of the judge. After the intervention of dedicated immigration attorneys and much deliberation, the judge decided to release him. You can imagine the instantaneous relief and exuberation in the hearing room at the moment of the announcement! A week or so later I visited the family again, this time with their father with them. What a joy it was to see them altogether.

Hugo’s story is a concrete, humanized example of the reality of the undocumented and their families in our country. As St. John Paul II teaches in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, yes, we *are* all our brother’s and sister’s keeper. This is simply another way of stating the Golden Rule, a universal ethical principle. How should our society treat Hugo, and millions of other sisters and brothers like him? How would you want to be treated if you were in their situation? In a virtuous society, that is, one whose political, social and economic institutions allow all its members – both native and foreign born – to flourish, the answer to both questions is the same. We should help to nurture and shape institutions and cultural norms in such a way that will allow everyone who lives here an opportunity to thrive. Will we be such a virtuous society? The character of our country will be defined by our answer to this question, and we as members of the Catholic Church have a vital role to play in helping to build our country into one that more closely reflects the Kingdom God. Perhaps it is a definitive role.

Catholic Church’s Concern for men, women, children “on the move”

In 2003, the Catholic bishops of the United States and Mexico issued a historic binational pastoral letter on immigration, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. The title takes its inspiration from St. Paul, who, in the second chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, states: “. . . you are strangers and aliens no longer. No, you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God.” He is writing here to the Gentile Christians at Ephesus who had been “excluded” from the people of God, since they were not members of the chosen people of Israel. But now God has revealed Himself to all people and given all nations access to membership in the people of God through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ on the Cross.

At the time of its publication I was a new bishop and felt very inspired by the bold and creative pastoral vision of my elders in the episcopacy. Not only does this unprecedented pastoral

letter express deep consternation for the loss of life and destruction of family life resulting from existing immigration policies and practices, but it provides us as members of the body of Christ an initial framework for responding to all newcomers facing harsh circumstances. For example, the U.S. and Mexican bishops' chapter on pastoral challenges and responses teaches us that our efforts must embrace conversion, communion, and solidarity. Conversion helps us to change hearts and minds, moving them from a place of fear or aggression towards migrants to acknowledging their innate dignity as children of God. Communion is expressed through hospitality "as a virtue necessary" for all followers of Jesus. Meanwhile, solidarity is building our communities with an emphasis placed on justice, peace, and true integration, where all members' gifts are valued and utilized for the common good.

To better understand our call as Catholics to engage migrants, we would be remiss not to reflect upon the Vatican's Twenty Pastoral Points. Following an extended consultation process with Catholic organizations, universities, and ecclesiastical conferences from around the world, the Vatican released a list of Twenty Points that sought to guide advocacy and other forms of engagement in the development of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. More importantly, these points remind Catholics around the world of our baptismal call to provide hospitality, hope, respect, and accompaniment to newcomers in our midst. The Twenty Points are structured around a set of four verbs which designate the four major actions that have to be taken: to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate. It is of much joy for me to see this entire conference being devoted to these priorities, particularly that of integration.

Of course, it is always important to see how frameworks, roadmaps, and guidelines can materialize into fruitful initiatives and concrete actions on the ground. One way we are witnessing the implementation of the moral vision brought to us by *Strangers No Longer* and the Twenty Pastoral Points is through the global "Share the Journey" campaign. Launched by Pope Francis in September 2017 and coordinated by Caritas Internationalis, Share the Journey fosters "a Culture of Encounter" by expanding and opening up physical and virtual spaces for communities and immigrants to safely come together to form bonds of understanding and solidarity. I am proud to say that the Catholic Church in the United States has immersed itself in this global initiative at the national, regional, and local levels, with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services providing a guiding hand.

In addition to this two-year campaign, the Catholic Church in the United States recently experienced a powerful event – the Fifth National Encuentro. As perhaps many of you here are

aware, [recent research](#) has noted that the majority of Catholics under 30 (52%) are Hispanic. How we respond to the needs of these populations will have a significant impact on the future of the Church in our country. It was at the Encuentro that over 3,000 delegates representing 150 dioceses came together to discern strategies for the U.S. Church to improve its response to a growing Hispanic/Latino presence. Informed by a 4-year journey of missionary activity and consultation, and of dedicated time, resources and space to the topics of immigration and migrant ministry, the V Encuentro culminated in a call for national unity in our response as Catholics to embrace and uplift migrants as our brothers and sisters.

Common themes found throughout Church’s pastoral vision speak to conference goals

When preparing my remarks to speak to you today, I was moved to see that several of the themes interlaced in *Strangers No Longer*, the Vatican’s Twenty Points, and V Encuentro speak directly to our goals this week – first and foremost, they align seamlessly with our efforts to “lift up a distinct Catholic vision of integration.”

Allen Figueroa Deck, who has offered reflections on *Strangers No Longer*, urges us to contemplate “ecclesial integration” as the final purpose of our work. “Ecclesial integration” is the antithesis of the 19th and 20th century idea of assimilation or “Americanization”, which erroneously urges newcomers to fully assimilate and leave behind or even discard their cultural heritage. Quite the contrary, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on Evangelization in the Modern World asserts that true ministry towards the newcomer engages “people’s core values and cultural identity” as an integral part of their faith, dignity, and life. Affirming this, the Vatican’s Twenty Points speak of a “two-directional process” that promotes and respects the goodness and richness of both cultures – that of the local host community and of equal importance that of the newcomer.

In sum, integration takes root through “mutual dialogue and “mutual learning”. While the host community accompanies and empowers immigrants to understand what it means to be a part of a new country, they are also called to take steps to learn about and truly value the cultural wealth brought to them by migrants. The Vatican’s Migrants and Refugee Section emphasizes the arrival of immigrants as “an opportunity for growth” for our parishes and local communities throughout our nation.

The Catholic Church’s role in immigrant integration also involves acts of communion among parishes and newcomers. As *Strangers no Longer* rightly states, communion is embodied through hospitality on behalf of parishioners and clergy, which imbues migrants with a sense of

belonging and hope. Our Church's hospitality, instead of exacerbating the isolation, fear, and uncertainty experienced by many newcomers to our country, encourages our immigrant brothers and sisters to move closer, engage, and accept our invitation to participate in Church life and society with their own unique cultural gifts and strengths in tow. This, in fact, is where the Catholic Church is uniquely poised to take a lead role in this effort: newcomers are in a strange land, but for many, the Church is familiar to them, a trusted and safe refuge in a perplexing and sometimes dangerous world.

Finally, our Catholic framework asks us to foster the "integral human development" of immigrants right alongside local and native community members. Let us recognize immigrants as active agents of their own development in their new homeland, and first of all by acknowledging and valuing their existing skills, competencies, and gifts. We can help them to leverage and enhance their strengths through resources and referrals to language classes, formal and informal education, apprenticeships, internships, and more.

Immigrant Contributions

Speaking of the need to recognize and leverage our immigrant communities' strengths and talents, it is vital to highlight the important contributions that newcomers have made to our country. Let us reflect again upon the U.S. and Mexican bishops' reminder of the Church's challenge "to live the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as they are converted to be witnesses of the risen Lord after they welcome him as a Stranger". Another way the bishops have us envision this is, again, through that lens of "conversion" – the process of helping others see Christ in each newcomer. Unfortunately, this often requires us to confront societal attitudes of cultural superiority and racism, often spurred by misinformation, apathy, and ignorance.

Since Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, emerging from a bipartisan effort, over 59 million people have arrived at our shores, transforming our country into a younger, more innovative and diverse version of ourselves. While immigrants make contributions in many, many areas of American life in many fields of endeavor, let me focus a few comments on the economic contributions.

The Brookings Institute highlights the wide agreement among pundits that immigration to the United States elevates our country's total economic output. Put simply, by increasing the number of workers in the work force, immigrants are improving the economy's ability to produce.

I would like to underscore one important estimate that suggests the total annual contribution by foreign-born workers to be 10% of the annual GDP – 2 trillion dollars in total.

We can safely say that migrants and their families are what the Center for Immigration Progress call a “positive force in U.S. economy and labor force”. First, due to a diverse and wide-ranging set of skills, immigrants are seldom competition for American jobs. On the contrary, their skills are complementary; the work they do is more often than not different than native-born employees.

In fact, some industries are kept alive by immigrant workers. This is very helpful for native-born workers involved in occupations closely associated or that rely on these fledgling industries, such as food production and construction.

We should also lift our immigrant community up for their entrepreneurial spirit and innovation. Per the American Community Survey, even one decade ago, 900,000 small businesses were owned by immigrants – which makes up nearly 18% of all incorporated business owners in our country.

Innovation and entrepreneurship do not stop with activity in certain sectors or small businesses. When the digital age arrived and flourished from 1990-2005, a quarter of the fastest growing businesses in the United States were founded by men and women born abroad.

Examining how changing US immigration and refugee policies are affecting Catholic institutions and integration efforts

The past two years have proven to be a whirlwind for immigration advocates in the face of an administration that has consistently taken a restrictionist approach on migration policy. Rest assured, we are redoubling our efforts to defend the right to life and the dignity of migrant populations facing uncertainty and a loss of protections. Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities, in offering a statement on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, expressed the Church’s sentiment on this issue with certainty and grace: “We are concerned about the life and dignity of the human person wherever it is threatened or diminished. We care about those harmed by economic poverty, by racism, by religious intolerance. We care about the plight of the refugee fleeing persecution and the immigrant seeking a better life for his or her family, of victims of violent crime, as well as those imprisoned ... Anyone whose life is threatened and anyone whose human dignity is disrespected have a claim on our hearts.”

We are living in a climate where family unity and the right to a dignified life of newcomers is at risk, causing clergy and laity alike to often feel worn down and perhaps at times defeated. Nearly every week brings with it a new executive action, administrative decision, or proposed piece of restrictionist legislation that ends up restricting migration into United States, destabilizing institutions that have traditionally helped to facilitate migration – including, for example, the refugee resettlement infrastructure – or reconfiguring migration patterns via proposals to shift away from a family reunification-based admissions system to a skills-based system. We could look at several examples here today to prove this point and, in doing so, spend a good portion of the afternoon detailing the various threats that such proposed changes pose. But time is short, so let me point briefly to a few examples and highlight why they are important to consider for this conference.

At the outset of his presidency, President Trump issued executive orders that effectively undermined prior interior enforcement and prosecutorial discretion priorities. By removing the clearly defined priorities for deportation ordered by the Obama administration, each local agency is now free to decide for itself which undocumented immigrants they determine should be deported. This has led to an increase of arrests of non-criminal immigrants who have lived and contributed to the United States for many years (such as Hugo Mejia), in turn resulting in a great increase of fear and uncertainty in immigrant communities.

The Administration has also proposed changes to the “public charge” element of our immigration law that would greatly expand the list of public benefits used to determine if an immigrant is considered a “public charge”. These changes would cause many more immigrants to be denied admission into the United States, since many more of them would be deemed a “burden” on the system; it would similarly restrict many immigrants from gaining an adjustment to their status to become a lawful permanent resident (LPR) or to receive a Green Card. These proposed changes to the “public charge” ground of inadmissibility would have adverse negative effects on legal immigrants and disastrous consequences for families.

In fact, as this policy is written, it is larger families that would suffer the most, including family members caring for older family members, since they have the greatest need of the benefits that they would then be too afraid to access. The same can be said for pregnant mothers, who have special concern for their own health and that of their unborn child. Such effective denial of benefits is antithetical and directly contradictory to Catholic principles upholding human life and dignity.

The migration policy changes at the U.S. border regarding humanitarian immigration have been equally draconian and destructive to vulnerable populations seeking refuge. In April 2018, U.S. Attorney General Sessions gave notice of a zero-tolerance policy that was facilitated by DHS, and that specifically calls for the detention and prosecution of adult family members illegally entering the country. Once an adult family member is detained for prosecution the children are handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services and placed in the custody of a sponsor, such as a relative or foster home, or held in a shelter. This includes separating infants from their mothers, and vulnerable young girls and boys from their fathers. As the pain caused by this separation became increasingly evident, Cardinal DiNardo joined Bishop Joe Vasquez, chairman of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Migration, in [denouncing](#) the immorality of "separating babies from their mothers".

Beyond the detriment that the Trump Administration's policy proposals cause to the well-being of immigrants and their communities, there is also the intimidation immigrants feel from the harsh rhetoric, such as referring to them as rapists, murderers, terrorists, and other forms of peril. This further entrenches the narrative that migrants are a threat and a danger to others, as well as stoking nativist sentiment. Consequently, many people – even people of good will – are blinded to the fact that each migrant has his or her own story to tell.

What is the message that these actions and harsh speech send to immigrant communities living in the United States? That they amount to little more than economic and national security threats which threaten the social fabric, that they don't belong here, and that we don't want them living in our communities. We should all be concerned that such actions and rhetoric will impede efforts to integrate immigrants into our communal life. Is it likely that an individual immigrant or an immigrant family will want to become active members of our nation when faced with such a strong message, even by the head of our country's government, that they are not welcome?

I am proud that the Catholic Church has taken a stand against such a view of immigrants and continues to promote a culture of welcome. From the beginning, the bishops have been publicly and consistently critical of pernicious immigration policies. Staff at the USCCB and in Catholic Charities across the country have played an integral role in reuniting families following the end of the zero-tolerance policy. I look out on the crowd here today and recognize that many of you have also played a role in promoting a counter-narrative to the one that feeds into the current rhetoric and policy priorities.

Let's pause for a moment to reflect upon the collective power of the Justice for Immigrants Campaign, a nationwide network comprised of diverse Catholic organizations and advocates united in support of immigration reform. Following the administration's policies seeking to end Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA), 55,000+ messages from JFI advocates were sent to federal lawmakers and the President urging their support and protection of Dreamers. The USCCB led a National Call-In Day for the Protection of Dreamers with approximately 40,000 calls to members of Congress as well. Additionally, Catholic lay people, religious sisters, and clergy alike met in front of the U.S. Capitol to hold a prayer service in favor of legislation that would open up a path to citizenship for Dreamers. We are in no way done advocating for vulnerable immigrant populations and in pushing for reform. Last week, Bishop Mario Dorsonville, Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, D.C., testified on behalf of Dreamers and Temporary Protected Status holders in the House Judiciary and we will be pushing larger reforms in Congress this session because our immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ cannot continue to face the uncertainty that these administrative changes have caused.

Many Catholic religious sisters form an integral part of the JFI network. In addition, they have pioneered their own advocacy efforts to advance comprehensive and just immigration reform. The well-known and respected Leadership Conference of Women Religious, representing more than 38,000 women religious in this country, also devotes tremendous time and effort to the protection of immigrants. As one example among many, the [LCWR network](https://lcwr.org/media/lcwr-calls-protection-immigrants) rallied together around public charge regulations by registering their objections to the Administration's proposed changes.

<https://lcwr.org/media/lcwr-calls-protection-immigrants>

Exploring promising and successful programs and ministries with immigrants

We have spoken today about how the Church's pastoral vision aligns with the goals of our conference, and this goes right down to the last of our purposes of being here together – exploring and highlighting both promising and successful personal and institutional encounters with immigrants, particularly on the local level. I would like to briefly share with you some successful programs responding to our pastoral call. Taken collectively, these four examples help us to envision a holistic and integral approach to embodying ecclesial integration.

I am proud to announce that the first promising example is happening right in my own Archdiocese of San Francisco. With the support and leadership of USCCB/MRS, we are

implementing the Catholic Accompaniment and Reflection Experience (CARE). This pilot initiative connects Catholic volunteers with community members who are undocumented immigrants, unaccompanied children, and their families in need of accompaniment and emotional, social service, and spiritual support when integrating into their communities or attempting to comply with immigration proceedings. Activities may range from accompaniment to an ICE check-in to helping children enroll in school. We are proud to be one of the first pilot programs along with the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. The CARE program is an example of the Church's commitment to accompaniment, experience and encounter.

Another model comes to us from the Archdiocese of Chicago: Pastoral Migratoria, or Immigrant Social Ministry. This program equips Hispanic lay leaders to support one another through service and social justice in their parishes. After a six-week leadership training series based on Catholic Social Teaching and the see-judge-act methodology, lay leaders are "commissioned" for this ministry in front of their fellow parishioners at church. They subsequently proceed to identify and prioritize their local community's needs in the areas of justice, service, and accompaniment, and launch a plan of action.

I also would like to introduce you to another successful model developed by the Jesuit Social Research Institute in Louisiana. The Catholic Teach-In on Migration Initiative fosters "a culture of encounter" by bringing together U.S.-born Catholics and undocumented immigrants in a safe space to generate empathy, understanding, and solidarity regarding undocumented immigration. Evaluations thus far have been very promising. While participating immigrants have expressed how affirmed and supported they felt by the experience, U.S.-born participants felt thankful for the opportunity to have "face-to-face" encounters, opening their eyes to a reality most of them said they were unaware of. [Highlights the importance of encounter – put human face on the contentious immigration issue, especially re. undocumented immigrants – let them tell their story – key element of Justice for Immigrants Campaign, too, in parishes]

Last but not least, I want to highlight the USCCB/MRS POWIR Program, "Parishes Organized to Welcome Immigrants and Refugees". POWIR, a nearly decade-long program, was originally designed to develop sustainable partnerships among Catholic Charities resettlement sites and parishes eager to assist refugees to adjust to life in the United States. This year is an exciting one due to an expansion in vision and approach. Twenty Catholic Charities POWIR proposals were recently selected to recruit parish and community volunteers not only committed to

supporting resettlement of refugees, but also to engage and embrace other important newcomer communities, focusing on sustainable localized initiatives that prioritize integration.

Conclusion

As the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC) notes in their recent publication on immigrant and community integration, the importance of integration “cannot be overstated. The integration of immigrants both among themselves and with their receiving communities directly affects the overall well-being of families for generations.” We must recognize the tremendous work and efforts of our Church and other faith communities as they respond with compassion and expertise to the needs of immigrants. CLINIC reminds us that a community which prioritizes integration offers all its residents – newcomers and native residents alike – equality, justice, safety, and opportunities to thrive.

As I conclude my remarks and we continue on this journey together, I would like to reiterate the wonderful opportunity that the National V Encuentro provides as a way forward to help us come together in a cohesive and coordinated front to embrace the immigrant community with a focus on welcome, protection, promotion, and – as we are all here to discuss this week – integration. As we will hear later from one of the panels, delegates attending the National Encuentro believe that we are at a pivotal moment in history to form a national unified effort that fosters and supports full participation of our immigrant brothers and sisters in society and in the Church.

Thank you.