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“Welcome the stranger” **Bishop John T. Folda**

Recent weeks have been filled with news reports and a flurry of executive orders and court cases on the issues of immigration and settlement of refugees in our state and in our nation. For many years now, controversy has been brewing on the national scene over the need to correct a “broken” immigration system. In North Dakota, too, there is public discussion about how to “absorb” the immigrants and refugees who come to our state.

As a Church, we believe that every human person has innate dignity and inherent rights, and we all have a shared responsibility to protect the common good. Specifically, every nation has a right and a responsibility to control its own borders and to assure the safety and wellbeing of its citizens. To this end, any nation has the right to regulate the flow of immigrants and refugees into its territory. Our nation is governed by laws, and the laws regarding immigration should exist for a purpose: to protect the immigrants and to preserve the common good.

Some have argued that immigration has gotten out of control and needs to be reined in. But there also seems to be a growing sense of suspicion and even fear of those who come to this nation seeking a better life. There may be grounds for concern and caution, but we should not allow fear to completely dominate our view of those who wish to make a new home in our communities and neighborhoods. Rather than seeing them as a threat, our faith should enable us to see them as children of God, brothers and sisters who are looking for freedom, security, religious liberty, and peace. God commanded the people of Israel: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:34). Note well that we are called to love the alien, the foreigner in our midst.

During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, we paid special attention to the works of mercy, which include the exhortation to “welcome the stranger” (Mt. 25:31-46). Pope Francis reminded us that “Jesus Christ is always waiting to be recognized in migrants and refugees, in displaced persons and in exiles.” With the eyes of faith, should we not try to see the face of Christ in those who have left their homelands and often travelled great distances through danger and at great personal risk? It might be wise to remember that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were also refugees who left their homeland and fled to Egypt under threat of death from Herod.

The history of the United States and of North Dakota is a story of immigration. Ours is a nation of immigrants. Our own state and diocese were settled by immigrants - Germans, Germans from Russia, Norwegians, French, Polish, Czechs, English, Irish, and many other ethnic groups. A significant number of these could be described as refugees who were fleeing from warfare, oppression, and poverty. And now, our history continues to be formed by other national groups from Africa, Asia, and Latin America who come to this country and now call it home. The Sudanese community here in Fargo is just one example of immigrants who fled terrible danger and finally can practice their Catholic faith and live in peace without facing daily threats to their very lives.

The Church has a long heritage of assisting migrants and refugees. For example, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, an Italian nun, came to this country from Italy and spent her life assisting refugees and immigrants living in desperate need after their arrival in the United States. She also became a U.S. citizen and was the first citizen of this country to be canonized a saint. Our own Cardinal Aloisius Muench was also a champion of refugees. After World War II, he was sent by Pope Pius XII to Germany as the papal delegate, where he exerted enormous effort to assist the huge number of displaced persons who were homeless and starving in the devastation of post-war Europe.

We should not be naïve about potential threats to our peace and security. Our public officials have every reason to be careful and prudent in their oversight and regulation of immigration into our nation and state. Moreover, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms not only the obligations of our civic authorities but also the obligation of immigrants to respect and abide by the laws of their adopted

country. But as members of the human family, we must always be willing to see the humanity of the refugee and the immigrant. Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, who is himself an immigrant from Mexico, reminds us of the human reality we are dealing with: “It is important to remember that behind every statistic is a soul, a soul who has dignity as a child of God, a soul who has rights and needs that are both spiritual and material.” He goes on to say, “We cannot lose sight of their humanity without losing our own.”

Throughout the history of this country, Catholics have experienced their own measure of suspicion and discrimination. For many years, the dominant culture doubted that Catholic immigrants could be “good Americans.” So we, more than others, should be especially mindful of the need to welcome the stranger without undue suspicion or discrimination. Let us look with charity toward the stranger at our doors, and remember the words of Jesus: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).