



February 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

How should we respond to this reality (World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2017)? With this simple question, Pope Francis places before us the invitation and the challenge to live the Gospel mandate of welcoming the stranger.

The current worldwide refugee and immigration crisis brings us face to face with our Baptismal call to be a beacon of hope for all people. Jesus welcomed the children. He reached out in compassion to the sick and the outcast. He never turned His gaze away from the marginalized. Every broken person who encountered Jesus found themselves in the presence of one who restored their dignity and worth.

The majority of refugees are fleeing war, persecution, oppression and other violence. These individuals and families are seeking safety, economic security and a better life. Our own North Country hosts several hundred men and women who migrate here to provide essential labor for the dairy farms and apple orchards. How do we think about and speak about these men and women? How do we include them in our community or parish? What type of outreach do we provide to them? Their goal is to earn money for their families. Most of them will return home after two or three years. Will they take home stories of the kindness and hospitality of the people of the North Country or will they return to their country with stories of rejection and hostility? We are the ones who will make the difference as to which story becomes the on-going narrative.

Many of our brothers and sisters in our global community are suffering. Forced to flee their homes and their countries, they experience exploitation, violence, hunger and homelessness. They live in fear. As long as they suffer, we suffer. Their pain is our pain. Demeaning rhetoric and hateful behavior towards our suffering brothers and sisters should leave us heartbroken.

We all agree that fair, efficient and stringent vetting policies and practices are needed. No one argues against secure borders. However, we must remain vigilant that our policies are not based on exaggerated fear, racism, ethnic oppression or religious intolerance. Other than our Native American brothers and sisters, we all claim an immigrant past. Many of our families came to the United States because they were fleeing religious, economic and other types of oppression and persecution.

Our nation experiences a deep richness in culture when ethnic groups live in peace with one another and share their diversity. Our industries, universities, healthcare systems and other institutions are strengthened by the gifts and talents of our immigrant neighbors. Our Catholic faith compels us to unclench our fists and open our arms, as Jesus did on the cross. Opening our minds and hearts to acknowledge that we are part of the human community will motivate us to think and behave as people of welcome and compassion. We will be capable of allowing the light of the Gospel to shine on this current humanitarian crisis. It is only then that we can answer Pope Francis question *"How should we respond to this reality"?*

I invite you to pray for all of us. May our hearts and minds be open to living the Gospel values of charity, justice and hospitality. Let us pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering from violence, persecution and oppression. Let us join together to pray for our global community. May peace be the goal and the reality.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
Bishop of Ogdensburg