



“Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of their own state. When there are just reasons for it, they must be permitted to migrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that they are citizens of a particular state does not deprive them of membership to the human family, or of citizenship in the universal society, the common world-wide fellowship of humanity.”

- John Paul II, Address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants, 1985

Understanding Catholic Social Teaching as it relates to Migration

Five Basic Principles

Although Catholic theology has always promoted human rights rooted in natural law and God’s revelation. It was the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor) in 1891 that developed a systematic presentation of principles of the rights and responsibilities of people. *Rerum Novarum* commented on the situation of migrants: in latter documents, popes and bishops’ conferences have synthesized the Catholic theological tradition to articulate five basic principles on migration.

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.

2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

The Church recognizes that all 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 find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should produce ways to accommodate this right.

3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

4. Refugee and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims full considered by a competent authority.

5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.

The Catholic Church teaches that every person has basic human rights and is entitled to have basic human needs met— food, shelter, clothing, education and health care. Undocumented persons are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers and they sometimes do not complain for fear of discovery and deportation. Current immigration policy that criminalizes the mere attempts to immigrate and imprisons immigrants who have committed on crime or who have already served a just sentence for a crime is immoral. In the Bible, God promises that our judgment will be based on our treatment of the most vulnerable. Before God we cannot excuse inhumane treatment of certain persons by claiming that their lack of legal status deprives them of rights given by the Creator.