

IMMIGRATION AND THE PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING/DOCTRINE

The Church believes that all decisions which affect society have a moral dimension. So, when making decisions which affect social, economic, political, cultural, and family life, there are moral principles which must be embodied in any such decisions and policies. Immigration is one of the realities that the Church's social teaching addresses often.

Introduction: Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation: *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad)

100. I regret that ideologies lead us at times to two harmful errors. On the one hand, there is the error of those Christians who separate these Gospel demands from their personal relationship with the Lord, from their interior union with him, from openness to his grace. Christianity thus becomes a sort of NGO stripped of the luminous mysticism so evident in the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and many others. For these great saints, mental prayer, the love of God and the reading of the Gospel in no way detracted from their passionate and effective commitment to their neighbors; quite the opposite.

101. The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection.^[84] We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.

102. We often hear it said that, with respect to relativism and the flaws of our present world, the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the "grave" bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him (cf. *Mt 25:35*)?

THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

[foundational principle; comes into play in every decision]

EVERY HUMAN PERSON IS MADE IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD AND IS ENDOWED WITH A DIGNITY THAT IS INTRINSIC, INALIENABLE AND INVIOLEABLE

- **Intrinsic:** Essential part of what it means to be human; not earned; not given to us by another person; not a social construct; not tied to how old we are, how smart we are, what status, ethnicity, race or religion we have within society.
- **Inalienable:** Not something that can be taken away by anyone or any group; not able to be lost because of bad or even horrendous behavior; belongs to the person simply because he or she is a human person.
- **Inviolable:** No greater good or hoped for end justifies violating this principle; can never treat a human person as merely a means to a end.

Questions to reflect on:

- 1) *Have I ever experienced my or another's human dignity being disrespected, even in small ways? How did that make you feel? What did I do?*
- 2) *What would change about our attitude and manner, if we always carry ourselves with a sense of that intrinsic dignity?*
- 3) *What practical things can we teach our children/grandchildren so that they show greater respect for their own dignity and the dignity of others?*

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

[core principle; comes into play in every decision but never supersedes the foundational principle of human dignity]

DECISIONS IN ANY ONE AREA MUST HONOR THE SUM TOTAL OF THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS WHICH ALLOW ALL PEOPLE, EITHER AS GROUPS OR AS INDIVIDUALS, TO HAVE ACCESS TO THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO FULFIL THEIR BASIC HUMAN NEEDS IN A REASONABLE MANNER.

- The human person is not an individual first and then chooses to join a society. **Human persons are intrinsically social**, and so have both rights and responsibilities toward the communities they are part of.
- The common good does not mean that all persons have a moral claim to equal access and use of all goods. Rather, all have a claim on and a moral right to access and use of these **goods for a basic human dignity**.
- The state does not own the goods of all but does have the moral responsibility to ensure that the common good is achieved as fully as possible, while respecting the legitimate **autonomy of individuals and groups**.

Questions to reflect on:

- 1) *What reasons would you give another person who asked you why they should honor this principle of the common good, if it means sharing more of their resources (e.g. higher taxation) than someone else?*
- 2) *What are the ways you see this principle actively lived out in our society?*
- 3) *What are the obstacles in our own lives to living out the common good, and where do we see it not honored in today's society?*
- 4) *Should any of the essentials of the common good be left to charity? How do we build this principle into our social systems without penalizing creativity and entrepreneurial risk?*
- 5) *Which immigration policies, in your opinion, currently support the common good? Which one's violate the common good?*

FURTHER PRINCIPLES

[these help us protect the principle of human dignity and give concrete expression to the principle of the common good]

- **Universal destination of all the goods of the earth with a preferential option for the poor:** all resources, whether privately owned or held in common, are to be used responsibly, exercising a preferential option for those most in need and on the margin.

Questions to reflect on:

- 1) *What responsibilities come with personal ownership?*
- 2) *Are there certain resources or services that should not be privately owned?*
- 3) *One of the key ways to morally evaluate an action or policy is by looking at how it affects those on the margin, the most vulnerable; in other words, what policies/practices show an appreciation for the "option for the poor" and which do not?*
- 4) *In what ways does this principle affect issues dealing with immigration?*

- **Subsidiarity and Participation:** Decisions are to be made at the lowest level of authority, which both safeguards the moral dimension and allows sufficient participation of the people who are affected by those decisions. Higher levels of authority are to intervene only when such intervention is necessary to protect human dignity and the common good.

Questions to reflect on:

- 1) *Are there areas of social, cultural, economic, and political life which are controlled by decisions made at too high a level? Too low of a level?*
- 2) *At what level should various decisions about immigration be made? Individual? Family? Border communities? State? Nation? World?*

- **Solidarity:** In all decisions we are to work achieving solidarity with those we are most different from or most vigorously disagree with, so that such differences do not lead to violence or insurmountable antagonism but to shared action.

Questions to reflect on:

- 1) *Where are the biggest challenges in today's world from this principle to be lived out?*
- 2) *How might this principle influence our approach to issues of immigration?*

[N.B.: The principles above are taken (though organized a bit differently) from the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Vatican City. 2005. Sections of the Compendium to read: reflect on #160-208. Available online at www.vatican.va/offices/index.htm

For materials that support United States Catholic involvement in immigration issues and changes in current immigration policies, see <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/index.cfm> and especially <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/>

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