

*Speaking of...*

# IMMIGRATION

The Church lives at a time with the largest number of displaced people worldwide. The flow of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants into nations other than their own is not unique to the United States but rather a global phenomenon that calls for the Church everywhere to reflect deeply on her mission among migrants.

## Who are immigrants?

There are important distinctions between refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants in terms of the push and pull factors that lead to their migrations and the types of processes that allow them to enter and reside in a host nation. Common push factors for refugees and asylum seekers include well-founded fears of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, or membership in another group. Other push factors driving immigrants include political instability, gang violence, and economic hardship. A major pull factor driving immigration today is family unification. People also migrate for better economic and educational opportunities.

Additionally, a minority of immigrants are in the country without legal status due to crossing a border without permission or, in most cases, due to overstaying a visa. They are often called illegal, undocumented, or unauthorized immigrants. Some immigrants have suffered various types of traumas and victimization either on their way to or after entering the country of arrival, including human trafficking, spousal abuse, and other forms of violence. Special humanitarian visas exist for these exceptional cases outside the established processes for refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants.

Knowing these distinctions helps us to put a human face on immigration, learn the stories of immigrants, empathize with their struggles and hopes, and seek ways to assist them in their everyday needs.

## How should the Church think about this and reach out to immigrants?

Immigrants are our neighbors. They fall under God's command to love our neighbors. God called Israel to intercede for and love neighbors who, due to their vulnerability or special needs, required their love to be prioritized. These neighbors include the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien or sojourner in their midst. Due to their lack of family networks and land ownership in a new country, aliens were especially vulnerable and often subjected to unjust treatment and abuse. Therefore, God must remind Israel to love alien neighbors

as themselves because they, too, were once aliens in Egypt. Thus, they should empathize with their struggles and serve as God's instruments of love and care on their behalf.

When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:33–34).

The church also sees immigrants as neighbors for whom Christ died and rose again. Like all neighbors, immigrants need the fullness of life that Christ's redemption from sin, death, and the devil brings about. Christ himself embodied God's concern for the aliens and sojourners outside of the house of Israel by reaching out to them holistically in their temporal and spiritual needs.

Although Jesus' mission focused on the lost sheep of Israel, he also reached out to sinners outside of (and even hostile to) Israel, like the Samaritans and the Gentiles. After restoring ten lepers to health, the only one who returned to give thanks and praise God at Jesus' feet was a Samaritan foreigner (Luke 17:11–19). We learn that foreigners, too, can enter God's kingdom through faith in Jesus. Similarly, Jesus promised the water of life (a reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit) to the Samaritan woman whose family life was broken, making her a true worshipper of God, and empowering her to become his witness in her community (John 4:3–42). Jesus also healed the demon-possessed daughter of a Syrophenician woman and praised her mother's faith, showing that Gentiles and their families too can receive the blessings of God's kingdom (Matthew 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30).

These examples of our Lord invite us to see immigrants with his eyes of compassion. Like Jesus, his disciples today embody God's care for outsiders like immigrants to meet their temporal needs and restore their broken relationships with their families and communities. The Lord's embodiment of God's mercy for the alien also encourages us to do what the Church does best in the world: especially attend to the spiritual needs of immigrant neighbors who thirst for Jesus' life-giving water, God's kingdom, and a relationship with God through faith in him.

## How can we learn to show hospitality to immigrants?

In meeting the needs of immigrant neighbors, the church embodies Christ's own hospitality as his representative in a world filled with strangers. In God's kingdom, those who welcome the least of Christ's brothers also welcome Christ himself in these saints: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35; see also Matthew 25:34–40). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul instructs Christians to "contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Romans 12:13). Alluding to Abraham's hospitality to the

three visitors (often thought of as divine messengers or angels) at Mamre in Genesis 18, the letter to the Hebrews exhorts Christians as follows: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2).

Abraham is often portrayed as the Christlike embodiment of hospitality in the early church. The same is true in the sixteenth century. At that time, the Reformer Martin Luther witnessed migrants coming into the land under the rule of his prince, Frederick the Magnanimous, due to religious persecution and other misfortunes. As a teacher of the church, Luther takes this opportunity to call the church to become the house of Abraham in the world. Reflecting on Abraham's hospitality towards the three strangers at Mamre (Genesis 18:1-8), and Jesus' words to the nations at the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:34-40), Luther writes that "on account of 'God's command,' the church must be ready "to practice works of mercy, to feed the hungry and the thirsty, to receive exiles hospitably, to comfort prisoners, and to visit the sick" (Luther's Works 3:180).

Luther sees hospitality as a mark by which people can identify the church in the world as the house of Abraham, who is both "a father of faith" in God's promises and "a father of good works" and all virtues such as hospitality (Luther's Works 3:185). Following the example of Abraham, whose "house was open to all" and who "joyfully received strangers," Luther exhorts Christians with these words: "Hence, if we want to be Christians, let our homes be open to exiles, and let us assist and refresh them" (Luther's Works 3:180).

### **Can Christians disagree on immigration and still reach out to immigrants?**

The answer is yes. As residents and citizens of a nation-state, Christians often disagree on what is reasonable, fair, or appropriate when it comes to laws and policies dealing with the complex issue of immigration. When looking at these temporal matters related to how life is organized politically in society, Christians often differ in their arguments and priorities. In the immigration debate, people advocate for many neighbors affected differently by varying issues, including fair labor practices, humane treatment of immigrants, family unification, economic benefits and liabilities of immigration, and border enforcement.

Christians, however, as resident aliens in this world whose citizenship is ultimately in heaven (Philippians 3:20), are called to make disciples of all nations according to Christ's command (Matthew 28:18-20). Their unity in Christ is rooted in the Gospel of God's love and the forgiveness of sins for the world. It does not depend on their agreement on laws or policies or adiaphora. Similarly, the church's unity in its mission to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them is rooted in Christ's own Word and command and does not require agreement on political matters.

Christians are free to have civil disagreements on political issues, and at the same time, they are called by God to boldly live out their faith in Christ in mission. The church often finds ways to attend to the temporal needs of immigrants, including partnering with competent people who can provide legal counsel for the undocumented. However, the church's main contribution and her unique calling in a world filled with people on the move is to attend to the spiritual needs of immigrants and their families through the proclamation of the Gospel, the teaching of God's Word, and spiritual care.

The apostle Peter sums up very well the role of the Church in saying: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor[b] as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:9-17 ESV)  
How can I pray for people on the move?

### **Here is a simple prayer for your consideration:**

Heavenly Father, we pray for all displaced people across the world, whether refugees, asylum seekers, or immigrants, that they might find a country and, most especially, a church they can call home. May Your Church everywhere be the house of Abraham in a world filled with neighbors on the move who are hungry for hospitality and in dire need of the good news of salvation through Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



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