

# STATEMENT ON COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
CANONIZATION OF SAINT OSCAR ROMERO  
OCTOBER 14, 2019

*Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.*  
(Mt. 25:40)



**BISHOP  
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**A** year ago, as a way of celebrating the October 14, 2018, canonization of Saint Oscar Romero, I, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, issued a Pastoral Letter entitled *Archbishop Saint Oscar Romero: A Catholic Martyr who made the Holy Sacrifice of his Life while Celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*.

That letter connected St. Romero's life, holiness and witness to various interdependent dimensions of our Catholic Faith: "We take yet another opportunity to connect the canonization, in a spirit of pastoral charity, promotion of human rights and global justice, to a call for comprehensive immigration reform for our nation that is built on the principles of the dignity of the human person, social justice, the sanctity of human life and the family, and a Good Samaritan love for the poor."

A year later, on the First Anniversary of St. Romero's canonization, and in unity with the many fine statements and interventions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops concerning the plight of refugees, non-documented immigrants, the separation of families, and dismay over a broken immigration system, I renew my own call for comprehensive immigration reform in this country and globally.

Our society finds itself deeply divided

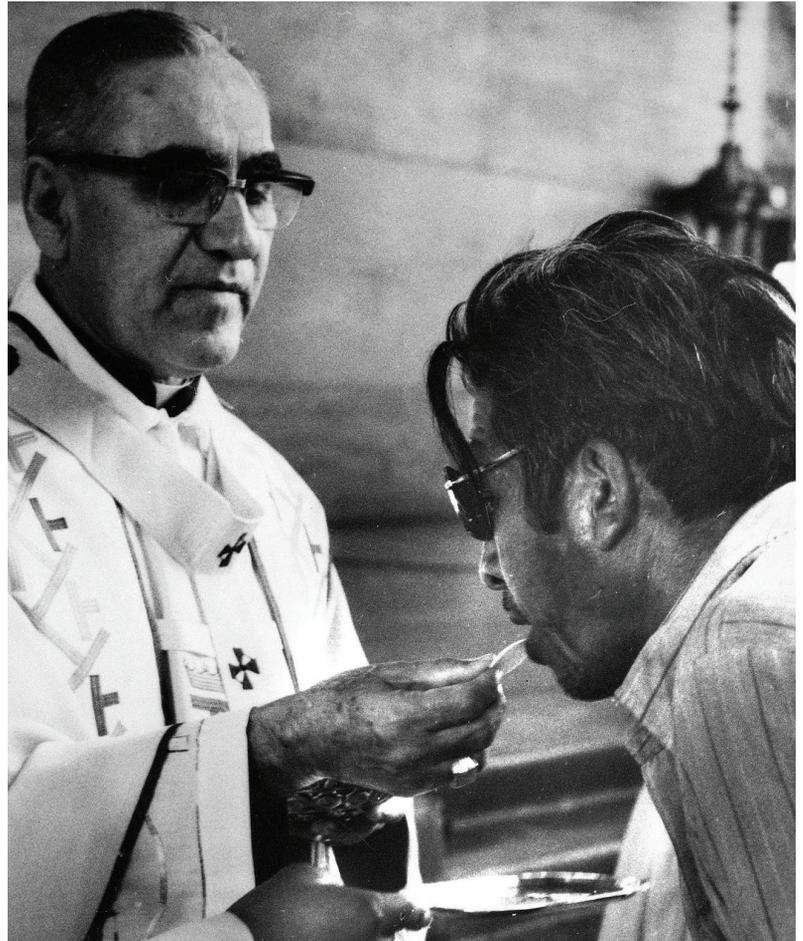
on immigration questions. Almost daily, media stories and commentaries reveal an environment where it has become difficult to engage in honest debate, let alone civil conversation.

Political leaders and commentators on all sides frequently exploit these divisions and thereby contribute to them. While partisan divides are not limited to the topic of immigration, they have become particularly bitter and polemical on this issue. To a large extent, they appear to have masked the complexities of many immigration questions and have eliminated necessary nuances from the discussions.



◀ **ARCHBISHOP  
OSCAR ARNULFO  
ROMERO**

▼ ARCHBISHOP ROMERO  
CELEBRATING MASS WITH THE  
PEOPLE OF A VILLAGE, AS HE  
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While acknowledging that the conversation is difficult, it is also of vital importance. The questions surrounding the migration of persons from one country to another involve profound matters. Questions of justice, human dignity, respect for human life, respect for the dignity and unity of the family, and the importance of compassion should be at the forefront of the conversation. The Catholic commitment to a Good Samaritan spirit of service to all who suffer and are in crisis demands nothing less. These questions raise, in turn, a host of legitimate prudential concerns that simply cannot be ignored.

Of course, the debates in the United States are set against a worldwide context of migration, conflict, and controversy. Pope Francis has spoken frequently of the dignity and rights of migrants in that worldwide context and has challenged each country to examine its own actions and/or lack of action. When Pope Francis made his Apostolic Journey to the United States in 2015, standing before Independence Hall he said:

*Among us today are ... representatives of recent immigrants to the United States. Many of you have emigrated ... to this country at great personal cost, in the hope of building a new life. Do not be discouraged by whatever hardships you face. I ask you not to forget that, like those who came here before you, you bring many gifts to this nation ... You are also called to be responsible citizens, and to contribute fruitfully – as those who came before you did with such fortitude – to the life of the communities in which you live.*

Delving into this topic from a Catholic perspective may, and probably will, provoke or disappoint people on both sides of the debate. Nevertheless, even in our polarized times, I believe that there are enormous numbers of people of goodwill who will try their best to keep an open mind and welcome an honest exchange to advance the common good.

The Catholic Church has a centuries-long tradition of caring for the needs of migrants while addressing the complex moral question of balancing migration and proper civil governance. At this very moment, Catholic communities and institutions are working with and for migrants all around the globe.

As Americans, we all take pride in our nation that has offered refuge to so many for so long who come from such a marvelous diversity of places and cultures. Almost all of us can look at our own family trees to see clearly that from the first ancestor of ours to step on this shore to the present, we have all been immersed in the American immigrant experience.

This legacy is beautifully symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, standing in our own New York harbor, holding aloft the torch of freedom as she looks out to sea. It is true that our immigrant experience also includes struggle, injustice, hatreds, and even slavery. Yet, America can also point to its long history of fighting against such sins and for the dignity of all who are “created equal” and who are “endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights”.

Drawing on both our Catholic Faith and our American

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heritage, we can review together three essential elements: the right of people to migrate and the right of a country to regulate its borders; the call to compassion; and the need for courageous leadership.

## The Right to Migrate and the Regulation of Borders

Catholic teaching holds that human beings who are driven from their homes by natural disaster, violence, oppression, or other threats to life, have a God-given right to seek refuge and assistance even if that search carries them across national borders.

This basic moral principle of refuge and assistance for those in extraordinary circumstances, however, does not preclude the need of a nation to regulate its own borders. In fact, Catholic teaching explicitly upholds the obligation of good governance to protect and regulate borders for the sake of the common good. Law-abiding citizens rightly expect the state to provide its people protection, security and order, recognizing that lawless borders lead to crime and victimization.

Because of the lawless state of much of our southern border, true refugees, particularly young women and children, are often victimized by criminals who prey on them with almost complete impunity. We

should always remember that it is not only the right but also the responsibility of our government to take effective measures to eliminate such lawlessness.

In our immigration debates, there must also be an acknowledgement that many migrants are, in fact, legitimate refugees and that this distinction does matter. Regulations enacted to govern ordinary circumstances must have the flexibility to adjust to the extraordinary circumstances of those who flee desperate danger. This moral dilemma demands a deeper look at such regulations and how they are implemented.

In addition, both prudence and justice call upon us to look at the origins and causes of such conditions. Is there anything that we can do to prevent or to mitigate the factors that drive people from their homes? True refugees leave home, not because they want to, but out of fear and a real sense that they have no other option. It is extraordinarily difficult to help other countries eliminate the troubled conditions that cause people to risk everything, leave their homes and become refugees. We cannot force another nation to accept our help. However, when we are able to take steps to help distressed nations reform themselves, then we also help their people avoid embarking upon the traumatic journey of the refugee.

## The Call to Compassion

In his address to the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees in May of 2019, Pope Francis taught that this modern crisis

of migration challenges us to recover “essential elements” of both our Christianity and our humanity. He called on us to recognize that the migrant is not a supplicant, but a partner. The migrant on our doorstep offers us the opportunity to be the good neighbor of the Gospels: to overcome fear of the “other”; to practice compassion; and to live the call of the Lord Jesus as told in the beautiful parable of the Good Samaritan.

Consider these words of Pope Francis on that occasion: “Compassion is a feeling that cannot be explained on a purely rational level. Compassion strikes the most sensitive chords of our humanity, releasing a vibrant urge to ‘be a neighbor’ to all those whom we see in difficulty.” Our partisan debates often diminish the profound awareness of the divine call to practice and to live that compassion.

Right now, many migrants feel fear and rejection. They find themselves pawns to the ambitions of the powerful. Where is that American tradition and experience of welcome and opportunity? Where is the compassion for our brothers and sisters in desperate circumstances?

In our diocese, there are thousands of people from the Caribbean and Central America who reside here having been granted “Temporary Protected Status” (legal status granted to people fleeing war and natural disaster). Now, after decades of hard work, and after having even raised children and grandchildren here, they face the fear of deportation. These are people who were granted protected status by our government and who, over the decades, have built new and productive lives here.

They fear being forced to be separated from their families and returned to their original homelands. It could be argued that they always knew that their refuge here was “temporary”, but as decades have passed, their lives have changed, and they have now become part of our community and contributing members of society. Under these circumstances, sending them back to countries in crisis, to homes they no longer remember and separating them from their children and grandchildren would be contrary to both justice and compassion.

## The Need for Courageous Leadership

It is important to acknowledge that the seemingly intractable conflict of the moment has a long history. For decades, American political leaders have failed to enact comprehensive immigration reform.

The Catholic Bishops of America have seen the tragic effects of our broken system among the people we serve. We have called clearly and repeatedly for bi-partisan and comprehensive immigration reform.

The fact is that we, as a nation, have not been regulating our borders for the common good. We have combined inconsistent enforcement with an incomprehensibly bureaucratic and dysfunctional system. At times, that system involves no enforcement at all — just fear. There is no question that our society seeks and needs immigrant labor. However, we first permit large numbers of undocumented workers to enter the country (often by way of dangerous and sometimes deadly routes) but then relegate those workers to an uncertain shadow existence.

Some say that by entering the country as undocumented immigrants they have brought this situation upon themselves. Some undocumented immigrants are indeed criminals, though

▼ ARCHBISHOP ROMERO WALKS AND LISTENS TO THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN EL SALVADOR.



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◀ **FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ARCHBISHOP ROMERO INCARNATES A MODERN MARTYR OF HOPE AND TRUST. HE IS THE PATRON OF THE 2019 WORLD DAY OF YOUTH IN PANAMA.**

our current broken system encourages criminals to take advantage of it. But there can be no doubt that the vast majority of undocumented workers merely want a chance to work hard and earn money to help support their families here and back home.

Ask yourself: If your family were in danger, your children were hungry and jobs were impossible to find, would you try to support them even if it meant taking a long, dangerous journey to live in the shadows in another nation? That is not a hypothetical question for millions of undocumented workers currently living in the United States.

These people deserve a chance to reap the benefits of their labor, yet instead suffer some of the most egregious effects of our failed system. It is true that we need secure borders and proper procedures for those who desire to enter our country and seek residency or citizenship. But that effort would be morally inadequate if it does not recognize both the real needs of true refugees and also include compassionate options for the millions who already toil in our midst.

Yet these issues are not insoluble. Compassion and mercy can be combined with prudence and practicality. Permitting a reasonable number of thoroughly vetted refugees to come to the United States (while at the same time seeking to prevent the necessity of their forced migration in the first place) is something that we have done repeatedly throughout our history.

Allowing those who came here years ago on “Temporary Protected Status” to live out their lives here with their children and grandchildren can readily be done. Taking these steps will help to restore order, regularity and security to our southern border. If additional reasonable steps are required to achieve that end, they too can be taken.

Justice and compassion reject the idea that legitimate refugees must cross our border in out-of-the-way places to be preyed upon by criminals. Indeed, they demand just the opposite; true refugees should not be made to sneak across desolate deserts to come to America. They should instead be welcomed and appropriately screened at fixed, regulated locations that provide both the necessities of life and proper documentation for entry.

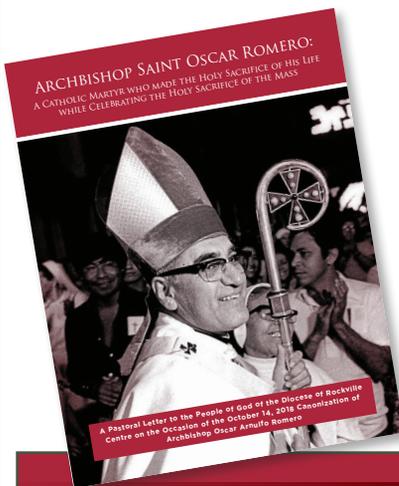
There will, of course, be some difficult issues. There always are. But while we know that perfection is never possible in this world, we can firmly believe that it is possible to do far better than we are doing currently. For that to happen, we all need to engage and work with our leaders to take immediate action that is both compassionate and prudential. This is a

necessity for the sake of the dignity of the human person, for the sake of compassion and for the sake of laws that protect and promote the common good.

Accomplishing this will bring us closer to establishing the Culture of Life first called for by Our Lord in the Gospels, proclaimed by the Apostles and their successors, and dramatically reasserted in recent years by Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Promoting the Culture of Life in this way can give momentum to build upon with our fellow Americans. Perhaps we can begin to persuade our fellow citizens to address other moral challenges to the sanctity of human life as well. Our voices and our Faith offer a wisdom and insight to this moment in America.

As Americans, we honor the proud legacy of our nation’s motto: *E pluribus unum*, “out of many, one.” And, as Catholics, our Gospel challenges us: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me ... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:35-36; 40)

May that Faith and that legacy guide us now. And, may the great and holy martyr, Saint Oscar Romero, intercede for us in our efforts to promote a just and comprehensive immigration reform in this country and around the world, as part of a burgeoning Culture of Life. †



## ARCHBISHOP SAINT OSCAR ROMERO: A CATHOLIC MARTYR WHO MADE THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF HIS LIFE WHILE CELEBRATING THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS

is a pastoral letter written on the occasion of the October 14, 2018  
Canonization of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

It is available at  
[drcv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Final\\_PastoralLetter2018\\_Romero.pdf](http://drcv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Final_PastoralLetter2018_Romero.pdf)