



Mass Deportations and Catholic Teaching | Kristin Heyer, PhD

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Thanks to everyone at Catholic IMMpact for this invitation and to all of you for joining us. Over the past year, the United States has witnessed sweeping changes to its immigration policy. As promised, this administration has adopted high daily deportation quotas, eroding former protections and pressuring local law enforcement to meet them. A law-and-order posture has also fueled the outsourcing of detention to notorious prisons within and outside of the United States, the deliberate defiance of due process rights, and deployment of the military. A disregard for the rule of law has been accompanied by death-dealing violence. We remember those who have perished both in detention and protesting enforcement protocols.

Newly released details indicate the Administration plans to double federal immigration detention capacity, including opening “mega-centers” capable of detaining 7 to 10,000 people. Bishop Brendan Cahill, chair of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Migration, has called this a “moral inflection point,” that “should challenge the conscience of every American.” The plans are indeed, as he notes, “deeply troubling,” as “[t]he federal government does not have a positive track record when it comes to detaining large numbers of people, especially families.” He rightly adds that it is the “private prison industry who stands to gain the most from this supercharging of immigration detention.”

Such developments endanger migrants first and foremost, but they also threaten and compromise those tasked with operating the machinery of heightened enforcement. Catholic teaching holds that any immigration enforcement efforts should be targeted, proportional, and humane. Enforcement mechanisms, including deportations, should

focus on genuine dangers to public safety and attend to responsibilities to uphold the God-given dignity of all human persons. The church insists on due process, access to legal representation to navigate the system, and transparent proceedings. Even in cases of the deportation of migrants who may pose well founded threats to society—which, as we shall hear today, have not come close to the majority, as promised—it is important to bear in mind the Catholic tradition upholds a preferential option for the vulnerable, not a preferential option for the innocent. Pope Leo XVI centered an option for those marginalized in his first major teaching document issued in October, *Dilexi Te*. There he traces biblical, theological, and ecclesial foundations for this preferential option. For the transcendent dignity of every human person, loved into being by God, stands at the heart of the Christian tradition—this dignity is neither conferred by citizenship status nor subject to removal.

Mass deportations underway today, however, raise significant concerns about protecting the rights of the precarious among us. Harmful rhetoric about violent criminals or death-dealing cartels are disconnected from migrant realities on the ground. They have paved the way for an indiscriminate deportation force that dehumanizes migrants and others targeted. Such fear-based claims often wield a stronger influence on attitudes than do facts about immigrants' presence, contributions, or relative rates of crime. A security-first philosophy playing out in masked ICE agents descending on embedded community members reduces migrants to “[pawns on a chessboard](#)”, as Pope Francis decried. Increased fears of deportation have deterred immigrants from attending routine medical appointments or lodging domestic violence reports, threatening the wider common good. I am in touch with students who have been avoiding attending school out of fear and who report trauma in the fallout of family separation. Even as the Church upholds the right of a sovereign nation to serve the common good of its population, this right is tempered by its duties to defend human dignity, to pursue social justice, and to protect the global common good.

For as participants at the Second Vatican Council affirmed in *Gaudium et spes* and Saint John Paul II underscored in *Veritatis Splendor*, mass deportation is among those intrinsically evil acts that the church opposes per se, independent of circumstances, such

as “...arbitrary imprisonment, ... slavery...or trafficking in women and children.” (Second *Vatican Council*, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27; cited in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80). John Paul II emphasized that such acts are “incapable of being ordered to God” given how radically they contradict the good of the human person made in God’s image (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80). The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* classifies mass deportations as contradicting the “solemn proclamation of human rights” (no. 58). Hence in the United States today, we are encountering not just new modes of enforcement, but occasions of moral evil.

In his [letter to the U.S. Bishops](#) a year ago this month, Pope Francis addressed the “major crisis” unfolding regarding mass deportations. He was clear in his opposition to indiscriminate actions that go well beyond balancing the right to migrate with the right to national sovereignty, condemning “the act[s] of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, ... exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, [as] damage[ing] their dignity ...[and] plac[ing] them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness.” In contrast to approaches that herald mass deportations as essential to defending the rule of law, he insisted “an authentic rule of law is verified precisely in the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized. The true common good is promoted when society and government, with creativity and strict respect for the rights of all,” “welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates the most fragile, unprotected and vulnerable,” his signature four verbs for addressing migration. He noted that this “does not impede the development of a policy that regulates orderly and legal migration,” [yet such] development cannot come about through the privilege of some and the sacrifice of others. What is built on the basis of force, and not on the truth about the equal dignity of every human being, begins badly and will end badly. (no. 4-5)

And in response to certain political applications of the *the order of love*, Francis clarified,

Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups. In other words: the human person is not a mere individual, relatively expansive, with some philanthropic feelings! The human

person is a subject with dignity who, through the constitutive relationship with all, especially with the poorest, can gradually mature in his identity and vocation. The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception (*Fratelli tutti*, no. 3). (no. 6)

Following very much in the mode of Francis, who truly had a heart for migrants throughout his papacy, Pope Leo wrote in *Dilexi Te* that “Where the world sees threats, [the church] sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community.” Leo will follow Francis in visiting the island of Lampedusa this July.

In a November 2025 [Special Pastoral Message](#), the U.S. bishops affirmed as a body that they “oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people.” They forthrightly lamented the climate of fear and the profiling and vilification of immigrants. They raised concerns about detention conditions and the lack of pastoral care and about threats to formerly protected areas like houses of worship, hospitals and schools. Drawing on insights from our creation, the prophets, and the gospel, as well as their experiences consoling family members who have been separated from their loved ones, the bishops took a stand with migrants, prayed for an end to violence, and advocated for meaningful reform. My own Archbishop here in Boston told me last week the video version of the statement has had 5 million hits on social media!

Finally just Tuesday the [border bishops issued a statement](#) out of concern for enforcement activities, noting “laws should be upheld in a manner that protects the God-given... dignity and rights of the human person,” and enumerating recommendations for reform.

Solidarity with our migrant brothers and sisters and firm defense of their dignity in the

face of fearmongering and direct threats is a moral duty, then, according to longstanding Church teaching, the concerns of recent popes, and instruction from the body of U.S. bishops. Pursuing the common good demands giving meaningful attention to root causes of migration and asylum seeking and protecting universal human rights—not indiscriminate mass deportation. Violent tactics make it all the more urgent that our migrant brothers and sisters know that their Church stands with them through accompaniment and advocacy alike.