

I Was a Stranger,  
and  
You Welcomed Me:

Meeting  
Christ  
in New  
Neighbors



A Pastoral Statement  
by the Catholic Bishops  
of Indiana

## I Was a Stranger, and You Welcomed Me

*Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

*“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.”*

*Then the righteous will answer him and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? “When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?”*

*And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”*  
*(Matthew 25:34-40).*

**W**e Catholic bishops of Indiana recommit ourselves and our dioceses to welcoming others as Christ himself. Together with all our sisters and brothers throughout the state of Indiana, we embrace an authentic and enduring form of Hoosier hospitality that goes beyond superficial slogans to the heart of what it means to be a community of faith that welcomes all who wish to share our way of life.



Our Lady of Guadalupe  
Patroness of the Americas

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love), Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that there is an intimate and unbreakable connection between love of God and love of neighbor. Because God has first loved us—completely and unconditionally—we are compelled to love one another. And, in loving our neighbor, we meet the person of Christ.

Who is my neighbor? Not simply someone who is familiar and close at hand. Not simply someone who shares my ethnic, social, or racial characteristics. In the Gospels, we learn that our neighbor is anyone who is in need—including those who are homeless, hungry, sick, or in prison. A neighbor might well be a complete stranger whose background, experience, or social standing is very different from ours.

## An Immigrant Church

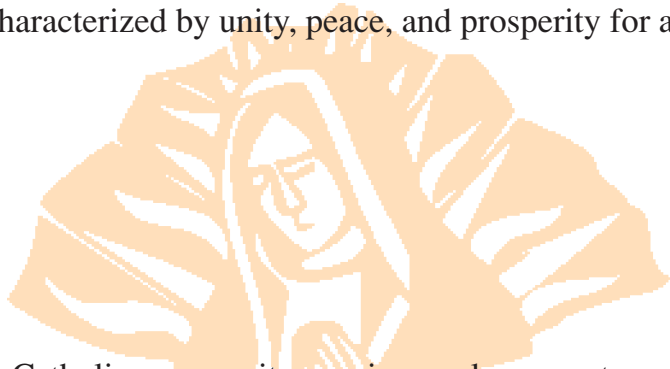
The Catholic Church, especially in the United States, is an immigrant Church, a pilgrim people on a journey of faith, hope, and love. We are fellow travelers on the way to our heavenly home, the kingdom of God. As members of Christ’s body, the Church, we are an exceptionally diverse group of people who are called to unity in Christ, who gathers all of the dispersed children of God into one family of faith (*John 11:52*).

Unity in diversity is our vision. Looking at the history of Catholicism in our country, we call attention to the waves of immigrants that shaped the character of our nation and of local churches. We also note that the immigrant experience, which is deeply rooted in U.S. religious, social, and political history, is changing.

These new immigrants are diverse in their origins, but they also reflect a wide range of skills, experiences, and

educational backgrounds. Many left their homelands because of fear of persecution. They are seeking a new life filled with hope, prosperity, and the ability to live, work, and raise their families.

These new waves of immigration have challenged our society and our Church to remember where we come from as the descendants of immigrants and where we are headed as people who are on the way to a better life, a more secure world characterized by unity, peace, and prosperity for all.



As a Catholic community, we vigorously support our nation's right and responsibility to provide secure borders for the protection of our people and to guard against those who would do us harm. At the same time, we reject positions or policies that are anti-immigrant, nativist, ethnocentric, or racist. Such narrow and destructive views are profoundly anti-Catholic and anti-American.

They oppose the principles of human dignity and freedom that are the foundation for our American way of life—a way of life that has historically been extended to all who have come to our shores seeking life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in a just and prosperous society. Such divisive and exclusionary attitudes are also profoundly anti-Catholic because they deny the dignity of human persons who are made in God's image. They also contradict the essential unity and catholicity to which we are called as members of the one family of God.

## A Call to Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity

Every member of the Catholic community in Indiana regardless of his or her place of origin, ethnic or cultural heritage, economic or social position, or legal status should be welcomed as Christ himself. Everyone should be encouraged to feel a genuine sense of membership and belonging in our parish communities and dioceses. The new immigrants remind us of our ancestral heritage as children of immigrants and of our baptismal heritage as members of the body of Christ.

On January 22, 1999, in Mexico City, Pope John Paul II stood beneath the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe and proclaimed a message of hope to all the peoples and nations of the Americas. In his apostolic letter, *Ecclesia in America (The Church in America)*, the late Holy Father spoke of the diverse gifts and talents of our people, the natural beauty and vast resources of our land, and the many distinctive cultures and traditions that have contributed to the way life is lived in our great metropolitan centers, small towns, and rural villages. As members of one family, Pope John Paul reminded us, we are called to conversion, communion, and solidarity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We believe that preaching and living the Gospel will lead the peoples and nations of the Americas “to a daily vision of the risen Lord, present and active in the world, especially in the poor, in the stranger, and in the migrant and refugee” (*Ecclesia in America, Apostolic Letter, John Paul II, January 1999*).

## The Teachings of Our Faith

Our commitment to human life and the dignity of immigrants is rooted in Scripture and the social teachings of our Church. “When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you, have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God” (*Leviticus 19:33–34*).

The Church’s dedication to caring for migrants was explained by Pope Pius XII when he said, “The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien, and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil” (*Exsul Familia Nazarethana, Apostolic Exhortation, Pius XII, August 1952*).

Immigration has been a constant feature of America’s history. In accord with the teachings of Sacred Scripture and consistent with Catholic tradition, immigrants should be met with a welcoming attitude. We affirm with Pope John Paul II that “the Church in America must be a vigilant advocate, defending against any unjust restriction of the natural right of individual persons to move freely within their own nation and from one nation to another. Attention must be called to the rights of migrants and their families and to respect for their human dignity, even in cases of non-legal immigration” (*Ecclesia in America, Apostolic Exhortation, John Paul II, January 1999*).

We call to mind the complementary teachings of the Church regarding the right of a sovereign state to control its borders in furtherance of the common good, along with the right of human persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given rights. Therefore, the state may impose reasonable limits on immigration. But the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated.

## Principles Guiding Reform

The principles drawn from these teachings guide us in the search for solutions to immigration issues:

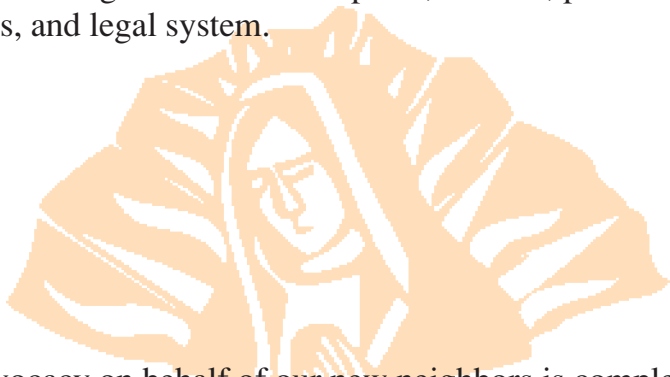
- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
- Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The human dignity and human rights of undocumented immigrants should be respected.

Pope John Paul II has said: “. . . it is very important that public opinion be properly informed about the true situation in the migrants’ country of origin, about the tragedies involving them and the possible risks of returning. The poverty and misfortune with which immigrants are stricken are yet another reason for coming generously to their aid” (*“Undocumented Migrants,” Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996*).



As Catholic bishops, we wholeheartedly support efforts to further develop our nation's laws concerning the migration of people to our country. Current laws and immigration policies are inadequate to protect the rights and dignity of immigrants and their families. They fail to properly maintain our borders or to adequately secure our nation. Change is urgently needed. We Catholic Bishops of Indiana remain committed to working at the local, state, and national levels.

We pledge our support for the clergy, religious, and lay leaders who collaborate with community organizations, Church agencies, and other religious groups on behalf of the rights of immigrants in the workplace, schools, public services, and legal system.



Advocacy on behalf of our new neighbors is completely consistent with our Church's historic role as a place of sanctuary, hospitality, and refuge for all who come to us in need of Christ's love.

We rejoice in the cultural pluralism that is our own Catholic heritage. We commit ourselves to conversion, communion, and solidarity as we welcome our new neighbors and work to ensure that they enjoy the economic, religious, social, and political opportunities that belong to them as free people made in the image and likeness of God.

## Public Policy in the United States

We have deep concern for those who will be affected by proposed changes in our immigration laws, which we hope will be debated in our Congress.

The need for reform of our immigration system is evident. It should include the following elements:

- A broad-based program of earned legalization for undocumented persons
- A temporary worker program with appropriate protections for both U.S. and foreign workers
- Changes to the family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times for family reunification
- Restoration of due process for immigrants

Immigrants in this country without proper documentation should be provided opportunities to obtain legalization if they demonstrate good moral character. Earned legalization should be achievable and independently verifiable.

Many migrants come to the United States to fill jobs. The U.S. experience with temporary workers' programs has been fraught with abuses. There should be a more rational and humane system by which laborers from other countries can enter the country legally—including temporary work permits—to fill jobs in the labor force.

We are compelled to raise a troubling issue. Currently, U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents must endure many years of separation from close family members whom they want to join them in the United States. The backlog of available visas for family members results in 10, 15, or more years of waiting before a visa becomes available. There should be a reduction of the pending backlog and more visas available for family reunification purposes.

## Public Policy in the State of Indiana

Similarly, we bishops of Indiana, have deep interest in issues affecting new immigrants to our state and issues that need to be debated in our General Assembly. Some elements of immediate concern include:

- Driver's permits for undocumented immigrants who must drive to work in order to feed and clothe their families
- Driver's permits needed for securing automobile licenses and insurance
- A broader process for immigrants to obtain legal documents for ownership of property beyond the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV)
- Access to health care and education for immigrant children
- Equal access to protective and emergency services for immigrants



## A Pilgrim Church

With all the vibrancy and enthusiasm of our youthful Church, we stand with migrants and refugees here in Indiana because we share their experience—in our history and in our spirituality—as the pilgrim people of God.

Brothers and sisters, join us!

Join us in meeting Jesus in our new neighbors.

Join us in entreating our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Americas, for help and wisdom as we embrace our new neighbors.

Join us in inviting our new neighbors to embrace us, no longer strangers to them, but as joyful brothers and sisters made so by our common baptism in the Lord!

**Catholic Bishops of Indiana**  
Archdiocese of Indianapolis  
**Most Rev. Daniel Buechlein**  
Diocese of Evansville  
**Most Rev. Gerald Gettelfinger**  
Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend  
**Most Rev. John D’Arcy**  
Diocese of Gary  
**Most Rev. Dale Melczek**  
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana  
**Most Rev. William Higi**  
December 12, 2006

*Artwork by Steve Erspamers*