



Archdiocese of Anchorage

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Office of the Archbishop

The 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel reminds us: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

For many months, Jesus has been walking across our border into the United States, but too few of us recognize Him. However, the children who have faced horrendous hardships to arrive at our doorstep recognize our Lord in the border guards they meet. For the children, these guards represent safety and security.

None of us can fully comprehend why these children risk everything to come to America or why their parents encourage them to make the journey. From stories, we know these children run from violence and persecution. Over 75% arrive from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, the countries that have, respectively, the first, fourth and fifth highest homicide rates in the world. Most are running for their lives, leaving their homes, families and communities where there are more gang members than police. They run from being the next murder victim. They run from being tortured, from being raped, from being forced into a gang. Drug trafficking and the sex trade have made the possibility of kidnapping and extortion part of their everyday life. These children don't run on a whim. They run seeking hope. America represents all that their homeland is not. A land where violent gangs don't operate with impunity, where they might have a future. A land where freedom and prosperity can be more than a dream. Something we often take for granted.

Several weeks ago, the Sunday *Parade Magazine* ran a story written by a doctor who, 35 years ago, fled Viet Nam. Under the Viet Cong, his family faced horrific oppression. Their only hope was to escape by becoming "boat people". As I read the story, all I could think was how it compares to the situation we face today. The author stated they arrived with nothing. Speaking no English. A Lutheran church sponsored his family. They, too, were running. From oppression, from a tyrannical government, from poverty and for the sake of their very lives.

We can't forget that our country was founded on these same principles. The first settlers ran for the same reasons. Throughout colonial times and for 238 years, this country has always welcomed the stranger. Many argue that nothing has changed. We still will welcome you if you follow the proper procedures. The United States Catholic Bishops recognizes the challenge we face with this unprecedented situation at our border. That is why many of our faith-based organizations along with others have stepped forward to help.

We recognize the value of human life from conception to natural death. The lives of each and every one of the children crossing the border deserve to be protected. Each of their lives is precious. Like each of us, they too are created in the image and likeness of God.

Procedures and safeguards are being put in place. Many of the children are likely to be eligible for a variety of forms of immigration relief, including asylum and various visas. Arbitrarily returning these vulnerable children back to their persecutors without listening to their stories could potentially lead to great harm. Who are we to condemn them to possible death if they return to their homeland?

The US Bishops understand the root problem must be addressed, both by our government and the Central American governments in the countries the children run from. The violence in these countries must be addressed and controlled. As Pope Francis recently said: "This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected. These measures, however, will not be sufficient, unless they are accompanied by policies that inform people about the dangers of such a journey and, above all, that promote development in their countries of origin. Finally, this challenge commands the attention of the entire international community so that new forms of legal and secure migration may be adopted."

Most of us don't wake up each morning wondering if this will be our last day on earth. For the sake of the children who are running to us, we must act. Countries all over the world are accepting refugees from war-torn regions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize have experienced a 712% increase in asylum applications from citizens of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala since 2009. Lebanon, a country of only 4.4 million people, has accepted over 879,000 Syrians in the last few years. Certainly the United States can assure the 57,000 unaccompanied minors a fair hearing, if nothing else.

Blessed Mother Theresa's words echo Matthew 25 and remind us: "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in."

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