

Three Basic Principles of Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration

First Principle: People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.

Because of the belief that newcomers compete for scarce resources, immigrants and refugees are at times driven away, resented, or despised. Nevertheless, the first principle of Catholic social teaching regarding immigrants is that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. This is based on biblical and ancient Christian teaching that the goods of the earth belong to all people. While the right to private property is defended in Catholic social teaching, individuals do not have the right to use private property without regard for the common good.

Every person has an equal right to receive from the earth what is necessary for life—food, clothing, shelter. Moreover, every person has the right to education, medical care, religion, and the expression of one's culture. In many places people live in fear, danger, or dehumanizing poverty. Clearly, it is not God's will that some of his children live in luxury while others have nothing. In Luke's Gospel, the rich man was condemned for living well while the poor man starved at his doorstep (Lk 16:19-31).

Second Principle: A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration.

Because there seems to be no end to poverty, war, and misery in the world, developed nations will continue to experience pressure from many peoples who desire to resettle in their lands. Catholic social teaching is realistic: While people have the right to move, no country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its social and economic life are jeopardized.

For this reason, Catholics should not view the work of the federal government and its immigration control as negative or evil. Those who work to enforce our nation's immigration laws often do so out of a sense of loyalty to the common good and compassion for poor people seeking a better life. In an ideal world, there would be no need for immigration control. The Church recognizes that this ideal world has not yet been achieved.

Third Principle: A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

The second principle of Catholic social teaching may seem to negate the first principle. However, principles one and two must be understood in the context of principle three. And all Catholic social teaching must be understood in light of the absolute equality of all people and the commitment to the common good.



A country's regulation of borders and control of immigration must be governed by concern for all people and by mercy and justice. A nation may not simply decide that it wants to provide for its own people and no others. A sincere commitment to the needs of all must prevail.

Undocumented immigrants present a special concern. Often their presence is considered criminal since they arrive without legal permission. Under the harshest view, undocumented people may be regarded as undeserving of rights or services. This is not the view of Catholic social teaching. The Catholic Church teaches that every person has basic human rights and is entitled to have basic human needs met—food, shelter, clothing, education, and health care. Undocumented persons are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers, and they are not able to complain because of the fear of discovery and deportation. Current immigration policy that criminalizes the mere attempt to immigrate and imprisons immigrants who have committed no crime or who have already served a just sentence for a crime is immoral. In the Bible, God promises that our judgment will be based on our treatment of the most vulnerable. Before God we cannot excuse inhumane treatment of certain persons by claiming that their lack of legal status deprives them of rights given by the Creator.