





Catholic Thought Centers on Expansive Compassion, Human Dignity in Immigration Response

BRETT O'NEILL, SJ, M Int.Law, STL, PhD
Contributor to *Health Progress*

Questions over immigration policy are increasingly prominent and morally fraught across Western democracies. Concerns over border security and fears of an overwhelming influx of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers were major themes in the 2024 U.S. presidential election; they have now become a key focus for the Trump administration, which has controversially carried out mass deportations without due process.¹ Catholics and other people of faith have been divided over this polarizing topic. How do we balance the Gospel's call to welcome the stranger with the legitimate need to uphold the stability and cohesion of one's nation?

This political climate has been a difficult setting for Catholics to reflect on the morality of immigration policies and their enforcement, given heightened tensions and the vulnerabilities of undocumented migrants. We have seen immigration issues misconstrued in a way that significantly impacts vulnerable people. Public officials have unfairly conflated undocumented migration with criminality and have used public unease over undocumented border crossings to issue an executive order that suspends the lawful and much-needed refugee resettlement program.² The motivations and courageous work of Catholic agencies engaged in this field have even been called into question.³

Yet this period also highlights how important it is for Catholics and other Christians to have a clear-headed discussion of immigration policy and border control in a way that can promote the interests of migrants and uphold their

dignity, while also recognizing the legitimate interests of communities affected by the loss or reception of new peoples. The ever-expanding forcibly displaced populations across the world and the increasing rate of deaths among irregular migrants (those attempting to cross borders without authorization) illustrate the urgent need for more nuanced and constructive ethical reflection.⁴

Calling upon the varied resources of our Catholic tradition, we need not resign ourselves to a fixed binary between an open welcome and harsh exclusion. Rather, these resources may help us reframe our approach, allowing us to balance the need for stable and secure national borders insofar as they enable greater hospitality toward immigrants.

MIGRANT HOSPITALITY AND THE 'ORDER OF CHARITY'

In a January interview this year, Vice President JD

Vance appealed to the notion of the “ordo amoris” (the “order of charity”) to defend the administration’s focus on immigration enforcement and its reduction of foreign aid.⁵ This notion, explored by Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, provides a way for understanding how relationships of greater intensity and proximity, such as with family and fellow citizens, can have a greater claim on our love and sense of responsibility over those who are more distant, but who may well be just as needy.

It recognizes the limitations of our human finitude that prevent us from loving all others equally, as well as the bonds of kinship and those that arise from proximity or common endeavor, entailing particular obligations of care. It affirms that we are called to love real people in tangible ways, bearing responsibility for those within our realm of care, while also retaining degrees of love for our neighbors beyond. Vance’s use of this notion seemed to suggest that, under the order of charity, nations can justly limit their ambit of concern to their own citizenry, without necessarily considering the welfare of those beyond their borders.

In a pointed letter to the Catholic bishops of the United States, Pope Francis directly challenged this interpretation. Looking instead to the example of love modeled by the Good Samaritan, who offered generous concern and care for a total stranger in need, Pope Francis argued for this as the more authentic order of charity that better accords with the Gospel. While the order of charity may be a useful framework for recognizing our finitude and particular relationships within the Gospel’s universal call to love, this framework is not meant to limit our love and concern for others. Rather, our more immediate objects of love ought to help us love more expansively and contribute to a greater good; they set conditions for loving beyond. Hence, Pope Francis rightly argued that our love ought to be expansive, not limited in ever diminishing degrees over a series of concentric circles.⁶

MIGRATION IN MAGISTERIAL TEACHING

The pope’s call for expansive love rather than a restrictive limitation to one’s own proximate circles of kinship sits well in line with modern magisterial teaching on migration. Immigration has been a recurring topic in modern social encyclicals. These magisterial reflections consider migration, when it is compelled by fear or mate-

rial need, as a lamentable tragedy that discloses the evils of global inequalities and sinful systems, given that so many people are forced to depart their homelands. Despite highlighting the injustices and evils related to migration, these teachings also recognize a sacramental value in migration movements.

The Vatican’s 2004 Instruction *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* remarkably described migration as “a sign of the times and of the presence of God in history and in the community of peoples, directed to universal communion.” Further, it suggested that the Church sees in migrants both the face of Christ, veiled under the stranger, and “a visible sign and an effective reminder of that universality which is a constituent element of the Catholic Church.”

Hence, migration can be seen as both a providential means (even by reappropriating unfortunate evils) toward universal communion, as well as a prophetic sign calling the Church and all peoples to exercise generous hospitality to better realize this communion. The migrant may be considered “God’s messenger who surprises us and interrupts the regularity and logic of daily life, bringing near those who are far away,” prophetically reminding the Church of its universal vocation, as “pilgrims on our way towards our true homeland.”⁷

Catholic social teaching thus consistently calls receiving communities to provide generous hospitality to incoming migrants. Pope Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio*, insisted on “the duty of giving foreigners a hospitable reception. It is a duty imposed by human solidarity and by Christian charity.”⁸ In *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI called for nations to “go beyond a narrowly nationalist attitude,” assuring foreigners of their right to emigrate, and favoring their integration.⁹

Across his pontificate, Pope Francis powerfully emphasized the importance of host communities receiving migrants with generous hospitality, aiming to counteract prevailing populist cultures of exclusion. Indeed, Pope Francis made the needs and aspirations of migrants and refugees one of the defining priorities of his pontificate. This key priority was dramatically indicated by the choice of the pope’s first papal journey outside of Rome, in July 2013, to the Italian island of Lampedusa, a prominent arrival point for irregular migrant journeys across the Mediterranean Sea at the time, which would later become the site



of several large-scale maritime disasters involving irregular migrants. On behalf of receiving nations and those who contributed to situations driving their migration, the pope asked forgiveness, seeking to awaken the world to the “globalization of indifference.”¹⁰

Pope Francis’ 2020 social encyclical on social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*, cohesively accumulated his many teachings related to immigration and global interdependence. The encyclical reaffirmed the Church’s traditional insistence on the dual rights not to have to emigrate and the right to migrate for just reasons. Yet it further enriched this teaching by situating it within a Christian anthropology that stresses the significance of human sociality. As the encyclical frames his argument on social friendship related to migration, “the human person, with his or her inalienable rights, is by nature open to relationship. Implanted deep within us is the call to transcend ourselves through an encounter with others.”¹¹

Given these shared inalienable rights, “if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbour was born in my country or elsewhere.” This means we are fundamentally in communion with the whole human family, as “the mutual sense of belonging is prior to the emergence of individual groups. Each particular group becomes part of the fabric of universal communion and there discovers its own beauty.”

Pope Francis pointed out that the welcome extended to immigrants is not just a matter of compassion but promotes the greater realization of our pre-existing global communion. Moreover, it even enhances the human dignity of both those who migrate and those who receive them, as Pope Francis’ encyclical notes: “The arrival of those who are different, coming from other ways of life and cultures, can be a gift ... Indeed, when we open our hearts to those who are different, this enables them, while continuing to be themselves, to develop in new ways.” For receiving societies, immigrants can be a benefit rather than a liability: “Immigrants, if they are helped to integrate, are a blessing, a source of enrichment and new gift that encourages a society to grow.”¹²

Pope Francis consistently appealed to receiv-

ing nations to welcome migrants with generosity, respecting their fundamental, shared human dignity. In his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis invited Christians to “stand in the shoes” of migrants “who risk their lives to offer a future to their children,” rather than simply view the challenges of migration as an abstract problem to be solved. The proper and primary response of Christians to the arrival of migrants is to appreciate their vulnerable position and see the challenge from their perspectives.¹³

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis envisaged an actively generous response on the part of receiving nations, one that is gratuitous in offering a welcome, even if it brings no immediate tangible benefit to receiving states, imitating the gratuitous generosity of God, who gives freely. Such generosity stands in stark contrast to some nations’ immigration programs that selectively favor those prospective migrants who can bring significant benefits to their communities, such as “scientists or investors.”¹⁴

“Immigrants, if they are helped to integrate, are a blessing, a source of enrichment and new gift that encourages a society to grow.”

— POPE FRANCIS

While Pope Francis emphasized the need to extend a dignified welcome to immigrants and facilitate their integration (without threatening their particular identities), he conceded a need for receiving states to regulate their entry for good reason: “Prudence on the part of public authorities does not mean enacting policies of exclusion vis-à-vis migrants, but it does entail evaluating, with wisdom and foresight, the extent to which their country is in a position, without prejudice to the common good of citizens, to offer a decent life to migrants, especially those truly in need of protection.”¹⁵

THE SOCIAL USE OF NATIONAL BORDERS

The pope’s prophetic call for wealthy nations to generously receive and integrate migrants in need can sit in tension with such a responsibility to prudently regulate migrant admission in a way that promotes the welfare of their own

communities. When trying to make sense of national sovereignty and border enforcement, it may be fruitful to turn to our Catholic tradition's teachings on private property and the universal destination of goods.

Like those holding private property, nations claim to have exclusive control over their bordered territory and exercise authority over migrant admission. In the Christian tradition, claims to exclusive control of property or territory sit in tension with the "universal destination of goods," that is, the understanding that all created goods are intended for the benefit of all creation. This principle should not be confused with some socialist ideal of collective ownership or redistribution. Rather, it means that the goods of creation, regardless of how they are held, are meant to be used for the good and sustenance of all creation and for ongoing generations.¹⁶ As such, a person cannot exercise absolute, exclusive control of goods or land without concern for the greater good of all.

This problem of property has been a recurring theme across modern Catholic social teaching. This tradition responds to Jesus Christ, who the Gospels record challenging his followers to relinquish what they hold and give to the poor to be perfect, suggesting that property and wealth can be an obstruction to discipleship (Matthew 19: 16-30). The question of private property, in both its need for one's own sustenance and the exercise of charity, as well as its danger to Christian perfection, has posed a rich creative tension throughout Christian social thought; one that can also illuminate its approach to national borders.

A key distinction that has emerged in the Christian tradition's reflection on private property, and which has helped reconcile its tensions, has been between the "right" to hold private property and the proper "use" of such property. In distinguishing between the right and use of private property, this body of teaching orients the private holding of property toward a social use ordered to the universal destination of goods. This distinction places the onus of responsibility on possessors to discern an appropriate balance in how they use their privately held goods for their own self-preservation (and that of any dependents) and for a social purpose oriented to the good of their communities and beyond. Correspondingly, nations are likewise challenged to use their territorial sovereignty, with accompanying control over borders

and migrant admission, for a social end in practicing generous hospitality and outreach to those in need beyond their borders.

Immigration will likely remain an intractable policy problem and a contentious issue in public discourse. Hence, it deserves sustained ethical reflection of depth. The Christian tradition, while primarily drawn to promoting the interests of prospective migrants, can recognize nations' legitimate exercise of border controls and enforcement measures. Yet this holds only insofar as nations respect human dignity and use these measures to promote the interests of all: citizens, immigrants and those beyond their borders.

BRETT O'NEILL, SJ, is a former Australian immigration officer and is now a Jesuit priest. He recently completed a PhD at Boston College in theological ethics.

NOTES

1. Tim Balk, "Cases Challenging the Trump Administration's Deportations Hinge on Two Key Legal Terms," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/04/20/us/trump-news#due-process-habeas-corpus-trump>; Myah Ward, "Behind Trump's Push to Erode Immigrant Due Process Rights," *Politico*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/28/trump-immigration-100days-due-process-00307435>.
2. "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt," The White House, January 29, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/01/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karoline-leavitt>; The White House, "Executive Order 14163 of January 20, 2025: Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program," *Federal Register* 90, no. 19 (2025): <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-01-30/pdf/2025-02011.pdf>.
3. Cara Tabachnick, "Vice President JD Vance Blasts U.S. Catholic Bishops Condemning ICE Entering Churches and Schools," *CBS News*, January 26, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jd-vance-interview-face-the-nation-catholic-bishops-ice-order/>.
4. "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance>; "Data," International Organization for Migration, Missing Migrants Project, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>.
5. Stephen J. Pope, "The Problem with JD Vance's Theology of 'Ordo Amoris'—and Its Impact on Policy," *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2025/02/13/>



ordo-amoris-stephen-pope-vance-249926.

6. Pope Francis, "Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops of the United States of America," The Holy See, February 10, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2025/documents/20250210-lettera-vescovi-usa.html>.

7. "Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi," The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html.

8. Pope Paul VI, "Populorum Progressio," The Holy See, section 67, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

9. Pope Paul VI, "Octogesima Adveniens," The Holy See, section 17, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

10. Pope Francis, "Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of Holy Father Francis," The Holy See, July 8, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

omelia-lampedusa.html.

11. Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti," The Holy See, section 111, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

12. Francis, "Fratelli Tutti," sections 125, 133, 134, 135 and 149.

13. Pope Francis, "Gaudete et Exsultate," The Holy See, section 102, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

14. Francis, "Fratelli Tutti," section 139.

15. Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings," The Holy See, January 9, 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170109_corpo-diplomatico.html.

16. Pope Francis, "Laudato Si'," The Holy See, sections 93-95, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.



JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Summer 2025, Vol. 106, No. 3
Copyright © 2025 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
