



STATEMENT ON FAMILY SEPARATION

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump said of Mexican immigrants, “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” He has repeatedly threatened to build a wall along the Mexican border and have Mexico pay for it. As president, he has issued executive orders to ban immigration from predominantly Muslim nations, and to withhold federal funds from “sanctuary cities.” In September 2017, he announced an end to the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. More recently, he has escalated anti-immigrant rhetoric at rallies and in tweets, claiming that immigrants “infest” this country, as if they were animals carrying infectious diseases.

In April 2018, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a “zero tolerance” policy at the southwest border, directing federal prosecutors to initiate criminal prosecution of all adult migrants entering the country *illegally*. The policy change resulted in a serious humanitarian crisis: the separation of more than 2,300 children from their families, some less than one year old, due to legal limitations on holding children in custody, and prohibitions against holding children in adult criminal facilities.

However, accounts from investigative reporters, immigrant rights organizations, and attorneys on the scene indicate that most people continue to present themselves *legally*, crossing at ports of entry and asking for asylum. It is a violation of U.S. immigration law to turn away persons who claim to be in danger without providing access to a credible fear or reasonable fear interview. Nevertheless, many persons entering the country legally have been detained, and separated from their children. Children have essentially been used as “hostages,” as immigration officials have pressured parents not to follow through with a credible fear interview, and told that if they agree to voluntary deportation, they will be reunited with their children. If not, they are warned, they will be held for an indefinite period, without their children.

Facing a national outcry, the president signed an executive order on June 20, designed to keep migrant families together at the border, abandoning his earlier claim that the crisis was caused by an iron-clad law rather than a policy he could reverse. By July 28, the federal government reported that 711 of the separated children had NOT been reunited with their parents, despite a court-ordered July 26 deadline.

Most of the migrants fleeing to the U.S. are coming from Central America’s “Northern Triangle” - El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. For decades, the U.S. has funneled billions of dollars in military aid to authoritarian Central American governments under the guise of fighting communism. The funding, equipment and training transformed regional civil wars into conflicts of exceptional brutality, created a generation of abusers, and decimated the institutions that should have kept survivors safe. In Guatemala, a truth commission blamed much of the brutality on military officers trained at the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia. The region remains plagued by poverty, corruption, drug trafficking, gang violence and domestic

violence. In June, Attorney General Sessions announced that the U.S. would no longer recognize domestic violence or gang violence as valid bases for asylum.

Like the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament includes emphatic commands to “love of neighbor” (Matthew 22:39 and 25:25, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9) and “welcoming the stranger” (Matthew 25:35, Luke 10:30-37, Hebrews 13:2). From a scriptural standpoint, it is clear that Christians are to love, welcome, and seek justice for immigrants. An important principle of Catholic Social Teaching is that all people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. Furthermore, there is an emphasis that 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.

As family separation by the Trump administration reached the crisis stage in June, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a statement that condemned the “continued use of family separation at the U.S./Mexico border as an implementation of the Administration’s zero tolerance policy. Our government has the discretion in our laws to ensure that young children are not separated from their parents and exposed to irreparable harm and trauma. Families are the foundational element of our society and they must be able to stay together.”

The zero tolerance policy and corresponding family separation implemented by the Trump administration flow from the president’s blatant racism and disdain for economically disadvantaged poor people of color. He appears incapable of seeing them as fully human, and the resulting inhumane policies erode their basic human dignity.

Pax Christi Michigan wholeheartedly agrees with the June 15 statement of Pax Christi USA (“*Not In Our Name: Pax Christi USA Deeply Disturbed by Vile Treatment of Immigrants*”). We too are “astonished, embarrassed, and deeply disturbed by the recent vile treatment of immigrants and the inhumane policies” of the Trump Administration. There is no moral or legal rationale that can justify its deliberate resort to the evil of separating children from their families.

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