

The pope is making a statement about immigration with this new statue at the Vatican

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SALT LAKE CITY — Pope Francis has repeatedly warned against exclusivist immigration policies and called for broader options for migrants and refugees to enter destination countries safely and legally at a time in which refugees are fleeing violent and unstable countries around the globe.

On Sunday, the Pope unveiled a new statue at the Vatican depicting 140 migrants and refugees traveling on a boat. He counseled people of faith to respond to displaced people with four words: “welcome, protect, promote and integrate,” The New York Times reported.

The pope’s outspoken views on refugees and immigration policies have raised questions about the role religious leaders play in debates about immigration. Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, says religious leaders are too narrowly focused on humanitarian needs and fail to consider nations’ rights and interests.

“My critique of them is that sometimes they implicitly conflate the purposes and mandate of the church with the purposes and mandate of the state.” said Tooley. “The church, of course, is called to offer aid and hospitality to all people in need, but the secular state’s primary purpose is to look after the interest of the nation and people over which it has jurisdiction.”

Tooley said there is nothing wrong with the statue if it is meant as a call for concern for people fleeing violence, but “inevitably” some will use it for political reasons to demand higher levels of immigration and refugee resettlement.

Worldwide, migration has become a flashpoint as 25.9 million refugees have been forced from their home countries, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Millions have been displaced due to religious persecution, by wars in Syria and Afghanistan and economic deprivation in Africa.

Last week, the Trump administration announced a proposal to limit the number of refugees who can enter the United States annually to 18,000. The number is a historic low compared to an average of 95,000 refugees a year accepted since 1980.

Matthew Soerens, the U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief, a Christian humanitarian nonprofit, says support of vulnerable migrants is rooted in the Bible and religious leaders offer an important perspective in debates about immigration policy.

The [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), [Evangelical Immigration Table](#) and the U.S. commission on International Religious Freedom, chaired by Southern Baptist pastor Tony Perkins, have all opposed the Trump administration's reduction in refugee resettlement numbers.

"Sometimes Biblical principles can and should impact the way we think about public policy," said Soerens. "We are seeing a lot of religious people from different backgrounds significantly concerned."

The statue

The statue, "Angels Unaware," by the Canadian artist Timothy P. Schmalz depicts migrants and refugees from different countries and historical time periods traveling on a boat. At the front of the boat, a Jewish man clutches two suitcases. Next to him, a pregnant woman with a resolute expression has a hand wrapped around her belly. Behind them, other migrants and refugees, including indigenous people, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, and those from war-torn countries in the Middle East and Africa, stand huddled together.

Schmalz took inspiration for the statue from a passage in the New Testament ([Hebrews 13:2](#)) which reads, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares," he said in an interview with [Crux](#). In the midst of the bronze figures, a pair of angel wings extends upwards, suggesting the presence of something sacred among the crowd.

The presence of the sculpture in St. Peter's Square is meant to commemorate the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, according to [Vatican News](#). In his message for the [occasion](#), Pope Francis said that extreme individualism is being reinforced by the media in rich countries and resulting in the "globalization of indifference" towards migrants, refugees and other people in need.

Tooley, however, doesn't think that prioritizing national interest when it comes to immigration is a sign of "indifference." He said religious people might think it's selfish for a government to look after its own citizens first, but that is not the case.

"That's not selfish," Tooley said. "That's similar to parents looking after their own children. Hopefully they treat other people's children well, but they shouldn't prioritize other people's children over their own."

According to Tooley, the pope and other Christians advocating for more lenient immigration laws should acknowledge that there are limits to the number of people who can be resettled in a given country, in addition to economic and security risks to be considered.

"We shouldn't focus exclusively on the personal and the humanitarian perspective, but on a much larger menu of concerns," Tooley said.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, said the new refugee limit is part of the Trump administration's broader agenda to reduce the number of immigrants, legal and illegal.

In response to an influx of migrants from Central America, the Trump administration introduced a number of new policies earlier this year to relieve the burden on U.S. courts and detention facilities, as well as prevent those seeking illegal entry from taking advantage of the asylum system.

Andrew Arthur, a resident fellow in law and policy at the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., said changes at southern border are not directly related to the reduction of refugee numbers. Rather, the 18,000 ceiling is part of a calculation of how best to use our country's financial resources.

A recent study from Notre Dame however shows that the amount of taxes paid by refugees over 20 years exceeds the support received by more than \$21,000 per person, suggesting that refugee resettlement could benefit the economy overall.

Bier also noted that more than 3 million refugees have been resettled in the United States since 1980, and none have committed acts of terror, thanks to an effective overseas vetting process.

“I think it's a mistake to presume that we have to choose between being a compassionate nation in a secure nation.”

Religious groups

Religious organizations play a vital role in resettling refugees and were the first to welcome displaced people from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War, said Aden Batar, director of migration and refugee services for Catholic Community Services in Utah.

Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services are among the organizations listed as U.S. resettlement partners by the United Nations.

But as the Trump administration has stemmed the flow of refugees coming to country, Batar says charities are now turning volunteers away. Whereas Catholic Community Services used to assist 1,300 refugees a year, they only received 500 people in fiscal year 2019. Batar expects that number will continue to go down.

“We tell volunteers, please wait until families are coming,” said Batar. He added that businesses in the area rely on the refugee workforce. He said he has received calls from employers wanting to hire refugees and has been unable to help them.

“Absolutely, Utah could take more refugees. We have the capacity, the resources and the will of our community.”

On Tuesday, Church World Service delivered a letter to Utah senators and congressmen saying that dismantling the refugee programs infringes on the religious freedom of Utah faith groups looking to welcome refugees.

Soerens said his organization, World Relief, has closed resettlement offices in seven cities, including in Boise, Idaho, Nashville, Tennessee, and Miami, Florida. He said the closures were a result of fewer refugees and a reduction in government funding.

For Arthur, who is Catholic, and Tooley, who is Methodist, it's a question of how best to help those in need.

"It is very, very expensive to resettle someone in a wealthy country like the United States," said Tooley. "The money spent to send one person to the U.S., if sent elsewhere, could potentially help many more people."

"The focus should be on ending the conflicts that keep these people from their homes, rather than the immediate settlement of some individuals."

Bier believes that religious groups with private funding should be the ones to decide how many refugees should be accepted into the U.S. based on their capacity. He said government funding and political motives should be taken out of the equation.

"The government should be in charge of background checks. It should not be limiting people's generosity towards those fleeing violence and persecution around the world," said Bier. "De-politicizing it and making it more focused on the individuals who have an interest in doing this work would be a positive thing for the refugee program and for the country."