



Taking the Catholic Pulse

Catholic leaders on refugees urge Trump to scrap order

Mark Zimmermann

February 1, 2017

WASHINGTON - A panel of leaders of Catholic agencies involved in serving refugees overseas and helping to resettle them in the United States said Feb. 1 that President Donald Trump's recent executive order on refugees should be scrapped and replaced with a more humane policy.

"The executive order is appalling, and deserves our attention and action," said Jeanne M. Atkinson, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.

CLINIC, founded in 1988, works with more than 300 independent nonprofit agencies throughout the United States, many of them affiliated with the Catholic Church, in providing legal services to immigrants.

Some of its attorneys were at airports across the country, assisting individuals and families caught in the chaotic aftermath of the Jan. 27 executive order, when refugees and travelers on a restricted list found themselves in a legally uncertain situation.

Officials from Catholic agencies who spoke at the press conference echoed concerns raised by many of the nation's Catholic bishops in the days since the presidential action. They said the executive order would lead to more suffering on the part of tens of thousands of refugees facing some of the most desperate situations in the world.

Speakers at the Washington press conference also encouraged the nation's Catholics to view migration as a pro-life issue, and to urge their legislators and the Trump administration to undo the order's restrictive measures.

Provisions include suspending the admission of refugees entering the United States for a four-month period, a halt to Syrian refugees entering the United States for an indefinite period of time, and a suspension on travel visas for people from seven predominantly Muslim countries, including Iraq and Syria, tied to terrorist activities.

Asked about the human cost of the four month ban on refugees, especially to Syrians fleeing their nation's bloody civil war, Bill Canny, executive director of Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said, "The pause for them and others languishing in places like Kenya and East Africa is devastating."

Canny said refugees often face squalid conditions in camps, living in situations of hopelessness and despair, surviving on half-rations of food, with adults not having jobs to support their families, and with their children often unable to go to school.

Dominican Sister Donna Markham, president and CEO of Catholic Charities, USA, has visited refugee camps in Iraq three times.

"These are people just like us," she said.

Describing the refugees' plight, she said Americans should imagine what it would be like to wake up one morning and have to flee for your life with your family members, and leave everything - your home, your job, your land - behind.

She said on a recent visit to Iraq, the refugees gave her what she called a "staggering" answer to describe how they felt.

"We feel dead inside," they told her. "Nobody wants us."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2015 there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 21.3 million refugees. Almost five million refugees came from Syria.

Of the 85,000 refugees resettled in the United States last year, Migration and Refugee Services, working with Catholic Charities and affiliated agencies, resettled 23,000 of those refugees.

For those working on the front lines of the refugee crisis, "It's a frightening time," Markham said. "The majority of those folks who were resettled by Catholic Charities are women and children. Vulnerable women and children," she said.

Markham said the executive order would also upend the lives of 450-600 Catholic Charities caseworkers serving refugees who could lose their jobs during the four-month period when refugees cannot enter the country.

"This is not only having an impact on very frightened people seeking to come to our country, but also the people serving them and trying to get them integrated in our communities," she said. "... This is not in concert with what the Gospel calls us to do, and I can't say that strongly enough."

Canny noted that even though the United States only resettles less than 1 percent of the world's refugees, the process is done in a very orderly, effective manner.

"We help refugees find jobs, get their children in school, get proper medical care," he said, adding that the resettlement efforts have had the bipartisan support of government leaders for

decades. “Domestically, it may be the best example of a public/private partnership in the country.”

Instead of the order’s perceived goal of improving the country’s safety and security against terrorism, the measure could actually make the United States less safe, said Don Kerwin, the executive director of the Center for Migration Studies.

The center is a New York-based think tank founded in 1964 by the Missionaries of St. Charles (the Scalabrinians), a community of Catholic priests, nuns and lay people dedicated to serving migrants and refugees throughout the world.

“Refugees now undergo the most rigorous and exhaustive vetting of any candidates for admission” into the United States, he said, adding that “the order obscures the fact that every act of refugee protection contributes to security... The overarching fact is that refugees themselves do not threaten security, terrorists do.”

Kerwin pointed to a Cato Institute study that found that between 1975 and 2015, when 3.2 million refugees were admitted to the United States, “there have been only three terrorist attacks by refugees, killing three people.”

He said blocking refugees from entering the country leaves them in situations of great insecurity and presents “a potent recruiting tool for ISIS and other terrorist groups.”

He said the executive order could also “make it far less likely that allied states and targeted immigrant communities will cooperate with U.S. counter-terror initiatives.”

Jill Marie Gerschutz-Bell, senior legislative specialist for Catholic Relief Services, said the agency strongly urges the Trump administration to suspend its executive order on refugees, and instead devise a humane policy by working with government officials and nonprofit groups experienced in serving those populations.

“The refugees are victims of the same violence that we are trying to protect ourselves from,” she said of the threat of terrorism. She said that the executive order’s “disproportionate response” to that issue should make people reflect on what it means to be an American, and what it means to be a Catholic.

The CRS official said this is a time to emulate the Good Samaritan and help, not shut out, refugees, and the United States should continue its tradition of welcoming immigrants and refugees “on the basis of need, not creed.”

Catholic Relief Services is the official overseas relief agency of the US bishops.

The CRS official noted that the agency recently reached “a sad milestone,” after assisting more than one million Syrian refugees. The group’s website notes that one-half of the Syrian refugees are children.

The executive order also said that members of minority religions who have suffered religious-based persecution should be given priority in being admitted into the United States when refugees are again allowed to enter the country.

Some analysts have praised that part of the executive order, noting that last year the U.S. State Department officially recognized that Christians and members of other minority religions in Iraq and Syria were victims of genocide on the part of ISIL, the Islamic State.

“We need to include them, but never to the exclusion of anyone else,” said Canny, who noted that Iraqi Christian leaders have warned that giving special status to Christian refugees could make the situation for that community more difficult in their home countries, which have Muslim majorities.

Also speaking at the press conference was Rebecca Sawyer, the vice president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, who noted that more than 100 Catholic college and university presidents in the United States had signed a statement opposing Trump’s executive order blocking the entry of refugees and restricting the travel of people from those Muslim-majority countries.

Sawyer noted that many American Catholic colleges were founded in order to help provide an education and a brighter future to arriving immigrants, and she said that students, faculty and staff from many different cultures and faiths form an essential part of those campuses today.

When asked about the fact that many Catholics voted for Trump because of his pro-life stance on the abortion issue, and considering that the president signed the executive order temporarily banning refugees on the same day as the March for Life, several panelists encouraged the nation’s Catholics to see the plight of immigrants and refugees as a pro-life issue.

Kerwin noted that many immigrants and refugees are fleeing violence and should be supported by those with pro-life convictions. “These are life issues,” he said.

That point was echoed by Gerschutz-Bell, who said, “When I think about children fleeing Central America, it is very easily a pro-life issue.” She said those children are being recruited by gangs that sometimes employ a “join or die” policy.

“Americans literally have the opportunity to save lives by helping refugees,” she said.

The press conference took place at Casa Italiana, the parish center for Holy Rosary Parish in Washington, D.C., a parish founded in 1913 to serve Italian immigrants that continues to provide Masses and cultural activities for Italians and Italian-Americans in the nation’s capital.

Kevin Appleby, the senior director for international migration policy for the Center for Migration Studies, introduced the panelists, and later said the current time offers a “special moment” for the nation’s Catholics.

“Catholics are in a special position. A majority of Catholics voted for President Trump, and he will listen to them on this issue if they weigh in” in significant numbers, Appleby said, repeating

the point made by the panelists, that the immigration issue, like abortion, involves human life and dignity.