



## **Pa. Catholic bishops urge Trump to care for ‘least fortunate brothers and sisters’; ask him to expand refugee program**

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Pennsylvania Catholic bishops on Monday highlighted a passage from the Bible’s gospel of Matthew to urge President Trump to care for refugees and the less fortunate.

The bishops are adding their voices to the growing opposition to a proposal out of the Trump administration to curtail or even shut down the country’s refugee program.

In a letter sent Monday to the president, Pennsylvania’s Catholic bishops appealed to his duties as a leader and a Christian.

“It is incumbent upon us who are blessed with countless gifts and opportunities in the United States to care for our least fortunate brothers and sisters elsewhere,” Eric Failing, the executive director of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, wrote in a letter to the president. “Let us not forget the words of our Savior when he told us, ‘Whatever you did not do for one of these least brothers of mine, you did not do for me’ (Matthew 25:40).”

Pennsylvania’s bishops are calling for the administration to maintain and even expand the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

“Refugees fleeing persecution overseas go through extensive background checks and health screenings,” Failing wrote in the letter. “This lengthy process can take two years or more to complete. Research, such as that done by the CATO Institute, has consistently found that refugees are neither a security risk nor a financial burden to the US or to the local economies.”

Pennsylvania has 10 senior church officials - including eight Latin rite dioceses and two Byzantine Rite dioceses with Apostolic Sees in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

National media outlets last week, citing sources close to ICE officials, first broke the news that Trump administration officials are pushing for a near-shutdown of the refugee program.

The proposal for a near-shutdown of the refugee program comes amid an escalating humanitarian crisis at the southern border, which has seen troubling reports of family separation, women and children being detained in squalid and inhumane conditions and even the deaths of migrants in captivity.

A growing number of religious leaders across the country - including the national governing body of U.S. bishops - have decried the news that officials in the Trump administration are considering “zeroing out” the number of refugees accepted by the United States.

Bishop Joe Vasquez, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Migration, last week in a written statement strongly opposed any reductions of the refugee resettlement program.

“This recent report, if true, is disturbing and against the principles we have as a nation and a people, and has the potential to end the refugee resettlement program entirely. The world is in the midst of the greatest humanitarian displacement crisis in almost a century,” he said, according to a report by the National Catholic Reporter.

“Offering refuge to those fleeing religious and other persecution has been a cornerstone of what has made this country great and a place of welcome.”

In the letter from Failing, Pennsylvania bishops ask that the refugee program be maintained at current levels; in addition, Failing says that the bishops believe that the resettlement program should be restored to previous historic average of 95,000 refugees per year.

The U.S. had admitted on average 95,000 refugees annually since Congress enacted the Refugee Act in 1980. The Trump administration capped the number at 45,000; and further scaled it back to 30,000 refugees for 2019.

U.S. Department of Defense officials have broadly opposed the proposal citing concerns that a halt to the program would endanger Iraqis who risked their lives assisting U.S. forces in that country and are now seeking asylum in the U.S. A halt to the program would also strand thousands of people already far along in the process, advocates say.

Other faith leaders and organizations opposed to the proposal include Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, which works closely with refugees: “It is horrifying to think that, by the stroke of a pen, the president can make a decision that will destroy a legacy of welcome that has been centuries in the making.”

Last week, more than 40 faith groups signed a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo imploring him to increase - not decrease - the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. They cited the decline in the number of refugees resettled in the U.S. for 2019 and predicted a 100% decline in the number of Jews and Zoroastrians from Iran resettled in the U.S. this year, as well as a 96.3% decline in Christians from Iran.