



## **Biden's Immigration Policies Embody Many Key Catholic Principles**

The U.S. bishops have been supportive of the president's initial moves, which include enhanced protections for children of undocumented immigrants and increasing the number of refugee admissions.

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Through a series of executive orders, appointments and a proposed reform bill, President Joe Biden is pursuing immigration policies that embody some key principles of Church teaching, including welcoming the stranger and promoting families.

"President Biden has signed executive orders, and promises to sign more of them in the days ahead, that aim to take the harsh edge off of President Trump's policies and to make our immigration policies more humane and just," said Daniel Philpott, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame.

So far, Biden has reversed a ban on immigration from several Muslim countries that was widely viewed as discriminatory. He has strengthened protections for the children of undocumented immigrants, shielded under the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. He is forming a task force to reunite children separated from parents due to the past administration's zero-tolerance policy on border crossings.

In addition, in one of his first calls to a foreign leader, Biden told Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador that the U.S. would send \$4 billion in development aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador — the trio of Central American nations whose severe economic and social problems have sparked waves of emigration to the U.S. in recent years. López Obrador said that he and Biden need to address the root causes of why people migrate.

Biden has also pledged to increase the number of annual refugee admissions up from the record low of 15,000 that it reached under the Trump administration. Philpott said that admitting refugees is "close to an absolute moral obligation and is required by international law."

"Keep in mind that refugees are different from the larger class of migrants. Refugees are people who are suffering persecution or experience an immediate danger to their lives," Philpott said.

The U.S. bishops have supported of Biden's initial moves regarding immigration.

"We know that changes will take time but applaud President Biden's commitment to prioritize assisting our immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters," Washington Auxiliary Bishop Mario Dorsonville, the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration,

stated in a Feb. 3 [news release](#) praising three immigration-related executive orders that the president signed the previous day. “We also offer our assistance and cooperation on these urgent matters of human life and dignity.”

### **The Bishops’ Immigration Principles**

In the United States, the definitive statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on immigration is [the 2003 pastoral letter](#) “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope.”

The letter outlines a range of principles that should guide faithful Catholics in assessing U.S. immigration policy. Those include the right of persons to find opportunities in their homelands; the duty to protect refugees and asylum seekers; respect for the human dignity of undocumented immigrants; the priority of family unity in immigration policies; the right of people to migrate; and the right of sovereign nations to control their borders.

The approach is rooted in the Old Testament commandment to “befriend the alien,” which is reaffirmed in the Gospel imperative to take in the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Matthew 25:35).

“The bishops, I think, have been generally consistent on two levels. No. 1 is they do understand the need to protect our borders. That has not been well publicized. They also know that we have to deal realistically with people who have come into this country, particularly the children,” said Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

He said Biden is implementing some of those principles, but not others. “It’s kind of split. I don’t think he has shown any resolve whatsoever to stop the migration of people coming into this country, crashing our borders. That is a grave concern. On the other hand, I think he’s very much in line with what the bishops want in terms of some amelioratory reforms that we need to address,” Donohue said.

### **Differing Perspectives**

One Catholic immigration advocate said Biden’s policies have empowered her organization in its efforts.

“During the past administration, we operated in a defensive posture to limit the destruction against immigrant rights and immigrant lives,” said Anna Gallagher, the executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC). “We finally have the room we need to serve and accompany, consistent with our Gospel mission of welcome with a focus on the dignity of immigrant men, women and children — especially the most vulnerable.” She said Biden’s “Catholic faith is evident” in the announcements on immigration he has made so far.

Biden’s new approach to immigration is also reflected in key appointments, such as the Cuban-born Alejandro Mayorkas as head of the Department of Homeland Security. “His respect for the dignity and rights of immigrants is real. The job here is not only to undo the destruction of the previous administration, but to lead us forward in building a humane, just and dignified immigration system,” Gallagher said in a press statement about the nomination.

However, Biden's immigration policies have also come under fire from those who support a more restrictionist approach, like Jessica Vaughan, the director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies.

"While we as Catholics are called to welcome strangers, we are also called to respect and follow laws and love and help our neighbors, especially our fellow citizens. One of Biden's first acts was to impose a moratorium on deportations. This move is almost certainly in violation of existing U.S. law and will endanger public safety, but, most consequentially, will encourage more illegal immigration," Vaughan said. A federal judge has temporarily blocked the moratorium.

Allowing illegal immigrants, Vaughan said, costs U.S. workers jobs and could give them access to "already-limited social services and health care." (Those points are disputed. For example, a Brookings Institution study challenges claims about immigrants taking jobs. And a Cato Institute study has indicated that immigrants, both legal and illegal, are less likely to utilize welfare services than U.S.-born residents. However, Vaughan's center also has produced policy briefs providing an opposing perspective on the labor and welfare impacts of immigration.)

"Repeatedly throughout the Gospel, Christians are called to obey the laws of man as well as the laws of God. As Jesus said in the parable related in John 10:1, 'In all truth I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a bandit.' These are blunt words, but can be seen as a call for Christians to live within laws for the good of social order and justice," Vaughan said.

### **Point of Agreement**

One point that many people from both sides of the debate agree on: The current system is untenable. Many see a comprehensive reform bill as the solution.

The U.S. bishops have long backed an immigration overhaul that would provide a pathway to citizenship for more than 11 million immigrants already living in the United States, create a temporary worker program, put families at the center of U.S. immigration policy, and also ensure enforcement.

Biden has proposed a bill that would do just that, following in many ways the priorities outlined by the bishops. In particular, the bill calls for a high-tech approach to border enforcement, following Biden's Inauguration Day executive action that halted further construction of Trump's border wall.

However, the bill faces an uphill road to passage. "We've been down this road before. Republicans and Democrats are equally to blame," Donohue said, adding that both parties have incentives to preserve the status quo.

"Let's face it," Donohue said. "The Republicans want the labor, and the Democrats want the votes — and those are two powerful motivating factors stopping us from having any immigration reform since 1986."

"It is one of the major failures of our national leaders that they have not yet passed a comprehensive immigration bill," Philpott said. "A good one would acknowledge the just and good insights of both parties. It would be humane and generous in admitting immigrants and in

helping immigrants who are already here in playing a full role in our national life, but would also bolster enforcement against illegal immigration.”

If Biden truly wants to be a “unifier,” Philpott said he’d acknowledge “the need for better enforcement of our borders.” “Admittedly,” Philpott said, “this will be an uphill struggle with a sharply divided Congress, but this is all the more reason to forge a compromise that would be genuinely bipartisan.”