

THE ETHICS OF MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION

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Summary

According to the 2015 International Migration Report of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, the number of international migrants —persons living in a country other than where they were born— reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, a 41% increase compared to the 2000 report. This figure includes almost 21.3 million refugees, 3.2 million asylum seekers, and 40.8 million migrants.¹ The U.N. Refugee Agency defines refugees and asylum seekers as people forced to flee due to armed conflict or persecution, while migrants choose to move in search of a better life —this latter group is the focus of this presentation.

The United States, the European Union, and countless other nation-states and political bodies are struggling to define attitudes and policies towards immigrants and immigration for the 21st Century. Moreover, this national and global debate usually revolves around **economic** impacts and the **legal** status of individual or groups of immigrants.

However, as Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City and Chairman of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Communications stated on April 22, 2013,

I would point out that [most discussions on migration do] not address the **root causes** of migration, an important part of the Church's position. As a global actor, the Church witnesses firsthand why persons migrate —to escape poverty and persecution. These factors that push people to emigrate must be part of the debate. Instead of constructing border walls, we should examine our economic policies and adjust them so that living wage jobs are not eliminated in sending communities. Persons have a right to remain in their homes and live in dignity. This is the long-term and humane answer to the challenge of irregular migration.²

Catholic social teaching in general, and the Dominican social ethics tradition in particular, believe a perspective which seeks to understand not only the **root** causes but the **ethics** of migration and immigration is needed on these critical policy questions on migration and immigration. Only by adding this **human** and **ethical** perspective can policy makers shape innovative and effective solutions, for the short, medium, and long term, that truly achieve the **common good** —the foundational principle of the Dominican social ethics tradition.

The ethics of migration and immigration are complex. There are many perspectives on **why** people migrate, **how** people migrate, **what** impact migration has on **receiving**, **transit** and **sending** countries, and whether countries should **encourage**, **discourage**, or **limit** migration. This debate is a timeless one. It can be divisive, or it can unite a country or a region. Interests of citizens and migrants may sometimes coincide and sometimes diverge.

Unfortunately, due to lack of time, this presentation will only raise the issues and questions — the so-called **quaestiones disputatae** of the ethics of migration and immigration— taken from staff attorney with the Community Law Center of Santa Clara University School of Law Lynette M. Parker's article "The Ethics of Migration and Immigration: Key Questions for Policy Makers" (Santa Clara, CA: Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2007)³, in order to encourage a later thoughtful, in-depth discussion of the ethics of migration and immigration.

As a framework for this debate, there are some crucial questions asked by Parker in her article: Who are the migrants of today? How do we understand the needs and rights of those who migrate? What rights do migrants have and how do those rights compare to the rights of those who do not migrate? How are the needs and rights of migrants to be balanced against those of the people from the sending, transit, and receiving countries? Do countries have obligations beyond those they owe their citizens? If so, what responsibilities do countries have to migrants? If not, then what entity has the power and will to protect migrants? Can countries to close their borders at all costs, or do they have some obligation to minimize the harm to persons crossing their borders? Are migration issues best served when addressed nationally, regionally, or internationally through orderly processes and clear laws? Or are there times that individual citizens or communities can and should address migration issues outside of national laws and legal processes? What are the limits on the power of countries to control or affect migration? Who decides what those limits are? Are there methods and forums to discuss and address migration issues? What format should these discussions take?

As discussed above, there are a myriad of ethical issues and questions —**quaestiones disputatae**— that should be discussed and debated. This presentation only attempts to raise some questions to begin discussion and dialogue. Parker's questions and issues are illustrative and certainly not an exhaustive list. The hope is that any discussion will be open and creative in order to promote an ethical response to migration in the world today while preserving the national, regional and global common good.

¹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2015 International Migration Report. New York: United Nations.

² Statement of Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City Chairman, U.S. Bishops' Committee on Communications (April 22, 2013): <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services/upload/Bishop-John-WesterFINAL-2.pdf>.

³ <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/more/resources/the-ethics-of-migration-and-immigration/>.