



## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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### Statement on the Current Immigration Crisis

We are a nation built on the backs of men and women who came from other countries, whether freely or in chains. Now we see our government adopting harsh measures to deport as many immigrants as possible, often without distinguishing between true criminals and law-abiding persons. A government that says it wants to help families is willing to separate immigrant parents from their children. A government that oversees the economy wants to expel millions of workers upon whom the economy depends.

Some of you have told me that you were happy to support a presidential candidate who would install order at the southern border and keep out drug traffickers, terrorists and violent criminals, but that you didn't expect this wholesale assault on the majority of immigrants, who work hard, are raising their families and live peacefully in our communities. You expected a laser beam approach, not a floodlight.

Our Catholic faith sheds light on this situation. Mary and Joseph had to flee their homeland because a jealous king wanted to kill their son. That son would later say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me*. Our Church looks at the person, not his or her legal status, and, following Christ's teaching and example, reaches out to help the immigrant. A person is more important than legal status. Even prisoners in jail are fed, clothed and have their health problems addressed, at least in well-run prisons. This Catholic Diocese will continue to advocate for and assist our immigrant brothers and sisters in our parishes and through Catholic Charities.

Keep in mind that entering the United States without official government permission is a misdemeanor – a crime but a lesser one, on the level with loitering, public intoxication and shoplifting; it only becomes a felony, a more serious crime, if a person is deported and then enters again without our government's permission. Consider, too, that immigrants tend to be younger, marry sooner and have more children than the average American-born couple. In a nation whose fertility rate is now only at 1.6% when 2.1% is needed just to maintain the current population level – and especially in West Virginia, which has been losing population for many years – we should welcome immigrants because we need them and the vitality they bring.

The main problem is that our immigration laws discourage legal immigration. Unless you are a celebrity or a person with a special skill that our government wants, it can take years to work your way through the complicated and expensive immigration process. Then there are quotas, favoring some nations and disfavoring others. In this scenario it should be obvious why some people simply cannot wait for the legal immigration process to slowly and painfully unfold. They could be killed for their religion or political views or see their children starve to

death before they are granted a visa to come here legally; so, they come anyway because they are desperate.

Both political parties have avoided dealing seriously with immigration reform. They have benefited by keeping immigration a live issue in their campaigns. Republican President George W. Bush presented an acceptable if imperfect plan to reform immigration laws, but his own party shot it down. Democratic President Barack Obama said he would act on immigration reform but, with Democrats in control of Congress his first two years, he did not do so. Our politicians have failed us.

Why should this matter to us? “*Am I my brother’s keeper,*” Cain asked God after he killed his brother, Abel. God makes clear His answer by expressing His outrage at what Cain had done. We can hurt people not only by hostile actions but by our indifference. We *are* our brother’s and sister’s keepers. On our journey to eternity, the Lord expects us to help one another. Why else would He command us: *Love your neighbor as yourself* and *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*? We may not have the large number of immigrants in West Virginia that we see in other parts of our country, but some are here, and they are our neighbors, coworkers, fellow students and, in many cases, our fellow Catholics. They deserve our support in the current climate of fear and intimidation.

In the light of these Christian principles, we the people must act. How? As people of faith, we should pray intensely for God to touch the minds and hearts of our political leaders and move them to be more reasonable and humane in their policies; and for those who implement those policies to do so with respect for their fellow human beings. I pray alone and have prayed with others for immigrants who are threatened by the government’s policies and actions and for a change of heart on the part of the officials ordering those actions. Could you not do the same?

We the people can also act to befriend immigrants. We can encourage those we know to avoid gathering in large groups and remind them of their rights, including the right to remain silent and the right to see a properly executed warrant from a judge. We can welcome immigrant friends into our homes. We can speak up when we hear grossly inaccurate talk about undocumented immigrants being uniformly criminal, when only a few commit violent crimes. (A police chief where I used to serve said publicly that the immigrants in that city were more law-abiding than the native-born citizens.) We can also let our public officials know that we want immigration enforcement to be less cruel and more focused on violent criminals.

We the people should also remember our history. The Fugitive Slave Act, passed by Congress as part of the Compromise of 1850 – an attempt to calm the tensions between slave states and free states – required not only local police but ordinary citizens to assist federal marshals in returning escaped slaves to their Southern masters or face heavy fines and jail time. Many Northern citizens refused to cooperate with a law they saw as manifestly unjust. It is Catholic teaching that an unjust law does not bind in conscience. But one must be willing to accept the consequences of civil disobedience. Martin Luther King, Jr., was willing to go to jail rather than acquiesce in unjust laws, a willingness shared by prolife activists and people protesting nuclear arms. As the English statesman, Edmund Burke, is reported to have said, “The

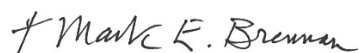
only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” We must pray for the courage to do the right thing.

I encourage even those whose official duty is to enforce the current Administration’s immigration policies to consider whether a specific action is morally justified. I recognize that they have sworn to uphold the law. Yet the manner in which a law is enforced matters. Those acting on the government’s behalf cannot escape personal responsibility for an unjust action with the excuse that it was ordered by their superiors. That defense was not allowed during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals at the end of World War II. The judges held that a soldier, guard or official, who authorized or engaged in gross violations of human rights, was personally responsible for his acts.

What has been reported about excesses in immigration enforcement does not approach the horror of Nazi treatment of prisoners but the principle of personal responsibility for one’s actions remains the same. Challenging a superior’s unjust or cruel order risks retaliation, so the degree of injustice a government agent perceives in such an order must be weighed against the potential for severe repercussions against the agent. Still, we should all keep in mind that the final judge of our actions is God. Our Church would have no martyrs if the highest good was to preserve one’s life. Some things are worth taking a principled stand for. How would God judge actions that pull a man away from his wife and children in order to deport him? How would He judge arresting a person just because “he looks like an immigrant?” How does He look at a large, rich nation that turns away the world’s poor and suffering?

I urge you to affirm the humanity of all immigrants, regardless of legal status. Our government’s own inaction is the main reason why many oppressed and struggling people feel obliged to enter our country without legal documents. Now our government is overreacting by trying to force them out. We Catholics must welcome the stranger and feed and clothe him. *For whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me* [Matthew 25:40].

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Mark E. Brennan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Mark E. Brennan  
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston