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Advocacy on Behalf of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers

In anticipation of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees on September 29, we, the Jesuit Conference President and Provincial Superiors of the United States and Canada, invite all Jesuits, Jesuit works, and our broader Ignatian family, to expand our advocacy efforts on behalf of our migrant brothers and sisters. We thank the many among you who have gone a long way already in creating a culture of encounter, living out Pope Francis' reminder that, "Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age" (Message for the 2018 World Day of Migrants and Refugees). Through this encounter, we create the opportunity to build a more just society, a more united country, and a more fraternal world.

For years, the Society of Jesus has accompanied, served, and advocated on behalf of migrants and refugees. In addition to all the ways the Jesuit family is responding to their immediate needs every day, we must pay attention to the laws and policies that affect those we serve. The Society's Universal Apostolic Preferences call on us to walk with the marginalized, which includes reforming the social and political systems that lead to injustice. Advocacy for just policies is an integral component of living out a faith that does justice.

Recent developments related to migration call for renewed action from our community. In the United States, new restrictions have been imposed on those seeking asylum, and the treatment of many families in particular is unjustifiable. In Canada, a new immigration law has been buried within a federal omnibus bill, and children continue to be "housed" in detention centers in Montreal.

It is important that policy discussions be grounded in a set of basic ethical principles. When discerning how our nations should respond to issues of migration, we turn to the four verbs Pope Francis outlined in his message for last year's World Day of Migrants and Refugees: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. These guidelines lead us to a compassionate, humanitarian, and moral response to migration.

Compassionate policy begins with asking the right questions. Rather than asking how the government can prevent or deter migrants from coming here, we should instead ask ourselves why they have chosen to make such a dangerous journey, and how we can better promote improved economic and political conditions in the countries that people are leaving. When people are forced to flee their homes and come to our countries seeking security, we should ask how we can welcome and protect them.

Answering these questions will require a paradigm shift. The incredibly complex system of laws and regulations in this area is itself the cause of considerable injustice and harm to many people. We continue to call the government to enact comprehensive immigration reform and policies that welcome, protect, and integrate those who seek asylum.

Jesuit ministries and works throughout our provinces witness the suffering caused by current policies. For example, in Nogales, Mexico, the Kino Border Initiative serves two meals a day to hungry migrants left stranded in Mexico as a result of turnbacks from the border. For two years, Bellarmine Chapel in Cincinnati has accompanied a family of asylum seekers in their legal process. Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and Jesuit priests at Sacred Heart Parish in El Paso bring grace and healing to those facing intense personal crises in ICE detention facilities. Last summer, Canisius College in Buffalo welcomed 13 asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo, providing temporary housing in a campus residence hall. In June, Sacred Heart Parish in Richmond, Virginia, secured legal services for a family from El Salvador fleeing threats from a local gang. In Canada, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) helps to sponsor refugees to come to the country. When they arrive, JRS supports their integration into the community, for instance, by helping register the children for school.

Policies, procedures, and regulations related to migration must put migrants' humanity before their legal status, nationality, or economic potential. A human-centered approach to migration offers an opportunity to move beyond the fear and confusion that characterize many of our current policies, instead choosing compassion and understanding.

We thank all the Ignatian and Jesuit leaders across our countries who have already taken action to advocate for the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. We ask you to continue this important work and invite all Jesuits, Jesuit works, and the many members of the Ignatian family to join us in these advocacy efforts. Contact your political representatives with a letter, email, phone call, or visit. Organize a local advocacy event. There are many ways to lift up our voices.

Please visit www.jesuits.org/migration to learn more about how to get involved.

Yours in Christ,

Very Rev. John J. Cecero
Provincial, USA Northeast Province

Very Rev. Robert M. Hussey
Provincial, Maryland Province

Very Rev. Ronald A. Mercier
Provincial, USA Central and Southern Province

Very Rev. Erik D. Oland
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