



Once Aliens, Too

A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese of Buffalo
Bishop Michael W. Fisher

First Sunday of Advent 2025

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

There are few passages of the New Testament which provide such utter clarity about the prerequisites of true Christian discipleship as this one from the Gospel of Matthew. In terms that the merest of children can understand, Jesus details what it means to be a faithful follower and the reward which awaits those concerned with the well-being of others. In demonstrating love and care for the most vulnerable—and compassion toward society's outcasts—we serve Christ Himself.

Having recently returned from the annual fall meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I feel it important to share with you, the Catholic faithful of our Diocese, as well as our broader community, some personal perspective of the [Special Message](#) of the bishops on the issue of “welcoming the stranger”—a topic that continues to incite intense political debate and is regularly distorted for partisan gain. This is the first time in a dozen years that the Catholic bishops of the United States have issued a “Special Message”—which is an extraordinary official communication issued in the context of a plenary session with the support of at least two-thirds of attending bishops.

This most recent Special Message on the topic of immigration condemns the *“indiscriminate mass deportation of people”* and the *“dehumanizing rhetoric and violence”* against immigrants. We also made clear that the condemnation of law enforcement officers—acting within their proper authority to enforce our nation’s immigration laws—is also unacceptable. We bishops exhort the nations of the world—according to the long tradition of Catholic social teaching—to recognize the

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

(Matthew 25: 34-36, 39)

fundamental dignity of all persons, and especially immigrants, while asserting that *“Human dignity and national security are not in conflict. Both are possible if people of good will work together.”*

Immediately following our national meeting on November 13, my brother bishops of New York and I issued our own unequivocal statement, titled: [“For You Too Were Once Aliens...”](#), dedicated to the memory of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini—herself an immigrant and founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who fought against prejudice against Italian immigrants and established charitable services to care for immigrants in New York in the late 1800s. We further called on all New Yorkers to sign the [“Cabrini Pledge”](#) to be “keepers of hope” by welcoming the stranger and treating every individual with respect and dignity.

We reference Pope Leo XIV’s very first apostolic exhortation of this past October and titled, [Dilexi Te](#) (“I Have Loved You”). The Holy Father reminds us of the long history of the Church’s requirement to show preference for the poor



and demonstrate compassion toward immigrants. The Holy Father asserts that, *"The Church, like a mother, accompanies those who are walking. Where the world sees threats, she sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community."*

The bishops are under no illusions about the complexities involved with reforming our nation's immigration system, something that has been debated though delayed by leaders of both political parties for decades. We also fully accept and acknowledge that our government has a duty to secure its borders and ensure that immigrants enter our country legally. The requirement to act with charity toward friend and stranger alike, however, takes precedence over all other imperatives. This obligation to demonstrate empathy and care for those who seek refuge in our country is *"concerned neither with legal status nor country of origin."*

Evoking Christ's central command to love our neighbor as our very selves, we insist that enforcement of immigration laws *"must be carried out in a humane manner that does not target the hard-working and law-abiding; that does not permit the wanton and unnecessary separation of families; and that does not rely*

on campaigns of fear that cripple whole communities." True immigration reform must offer measures of forgiveness for those who entered our country without proper legal status, but *"have proven their contributions and loyalty to our country over a period of time."*

What has long been our nation's proudest boast and motto, namely, *"out of many, one"* (e pluribus unum), must guide our attitudes, words and actions toward immigrants in this present day. Catholic social teaching begins with the premise that every person, regardless of nationality or legal status, possesses inviolable dignity and fundamental rights, as detailed in the seminal encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, [Rerum Novarum](#) (1891). Every pope since has referred to this foundational teaching on the inherent rights of the working class, which also provided the basis for the right of people to migrate, particularly when deprived of the dignity of having access to life's basic necessities: food, work, safety, and the means to provide for themselves and build a future for their children, *"for no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life."*

In his 1952 encyclical, [Exsul Familia Nazarethana](#), Pope Pius XII explicitly condemned what he regarded as contradictory and unjust policies that both restrict the rights of people to migrate, and which also force them to leave the security of their homes. He attributed the exploitation of migrants to *"ideas of the totalitarian and the imperialistic state, as well as that of exaggerated nationalism."*

He maintained that *"On one hand, in fact they arbitrarily restrict the natural rights of people to migrate or to colonize while on the other hand, they compel entire populations to migrate into other lands, deporting inhabitants against their wills, disgracefully tearing individuals from their families, their homes and their countries."*

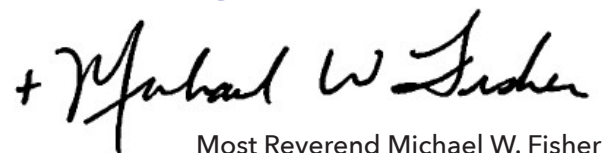
Pope Pius XII evoked the Holy Family's exile in Egypt as a model for all refugee families, as well as the Church's duty to care for migrants, regardless of the reasons for their displacement. Pope Pius XII evoked the Holy Family's exile in Egypt as a model for all refugee families, as well as the Church's duty to care for migrants, regardless of the reasons for their displacement. He made clear that *"...there never has been a period during which the Church has not been active in behalf of migrants, exiles and refugees."* Pius warned that neglecting the spiritual and material needs of migrants would create long-lasting and grave consequences, both for individuals and for society. He referred to the Holy Family as an enduring model meant to inspire compassion and solidarity, reminding the Church that every migrant is a child of God deserving of dignity and care. As such, Catholics are to regard migrants not as strangers but as true brothers and sisters.

This requirement was further amplified by Saint John Paul II who, in his [Message on Undocumented Migrants](#) for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 1996, stated: *"It is necessary to guard against the rise of new forms of racism or xenophobic behaviour, which attempt to make these brothers and sisters of ours scapegoats for what may be difficult local situations. ... For Christians, the migrant is not merely an individual to be respected in accordance with the norms established by law, but a person whose presence challenges them and whose needs become an obligation for their responsibility."*

More recently, Pope Francis issued a rebuke and call to action in his 2020 encyclical [Fratelli tutti](#) ("All brothers and sisters"), insisting that everyone—individuals, communities, and nations—bear responsibility for those who are excluded or "left by the roadside." He made clear that the moral stature of a society is measured by how it treats the vulnerable. Francis further criticized a "throwaway" and "closed" culture marked by aggressive nationalism, racism, indifference to migrants, consumerist individualism, and a "culture of walls" that only serves to isolate people and engender fear of those we find different from ourselves.

In this new season of Advent, when our hearts and minds are filled with expectation of the One who comes to us disguised as a vulnerable child from a distant place, I urge all to reflect on our obligations to "the stranger" among us. Mindful that our ancestors were also "once aliens" in need of compassion, care, and opportunity, we must speak out for those who desire only the same, but whose voices seem not to matter, and whose basic rights—even as immigrants—are so callously cast aside. As a nation, we know in our hearts that we can and should do better. As Christians, we must.

Your brother in Christ,



Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo

