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Justice For Immigrants Concerns Us All

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As we continue 2016, the “Year of Mercy”, we gaze upon the faces of Syrian refugees as they disembark from their perilous sea journey in small dingy rafts seeking safety in Europe and our hearts are moved with compassion. The desperation of those starving in besieged towns throughout Syria move us to tears and to ask “what is ours to do” in such a situation? During one of his first trips as pope, Pope Francis was similarly moved when he visited desperate refugees on the tiny island of Lampedusa off the coast of Sicily, and prayed for those lost at sea in a failed grasp at safety from violence, war, and oppression. Given the ongoing crisis, on September 6, 2015, Pope Francis asked every parish and religious community in Europe to take in a family of refugees as a concrete sign of hope and God’s mercy. Further, the Pope asked that two apartments near the Vatican be made available for two families and that the Vatican ensures that the families receive healthcare and have other basic needs met, including securing employment for the head of the refugee household. While there are now estimated to be over 4 million Syrian refugees, the US has accepted just over 2 thousand per year since 2012 for settlement in the US, and has agreed to accept a mere 10,000 in 2016. Since the recent terror attacks in Paris, the flames of fear have been fanned here in the US leading many to seek to bar all Syrian refugees from our shores until our safety can be “guaranteed”. The reality is that our immigration policies endanger us much more than any threat of terrorism. A failure to respond to this urgent need robs us of our ideals and our heritage as the place of refuge and hope for those in the world seeking “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”—seeking freedom from tyranny, oppression, poverty and starvation. These are the ideals and values symbolized by the statue of liberty in New York’s harbor, without which her lamp of hope is extinguished.

In November 2015, with the worldwide refugee crisis continuing to grow, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) held its annual workshop on “Justice For Immigrants” (JFI) at the Four Points Sheraton Hotel at O’Hare Airport in Chicago. Wheaton Franciscans Sisters Beatrice Hernandez and Sylvia Wehlisch were among the participants. The meeting echoed Pope Francis’ call for accompaniment of immigrants as a Gospel ministry response of the Church. The Gospel calls us to respond to the **globalization** of migration with the **mobilization** of welcoming and support. The opening keynote speaker was Archbishop Blaze Cupich of Chicago who chairs the USCCB’s committee on the Church in Eastern Europe and has been very active in working for comprehensive immigration reform in the US. He noted that immigrants are the strength of his city, with liturgies in Chicago being celebrated in 48 languages reflecting the immigrant diversity that adds to the city’s greatness. Worldwide over 60 million people are immigrants and over half are children. Many have fled poverty, violence and oppression, seeking a better life. This large scale migration is the largest humanitarian crisis since WWII. Unfortunately, US immigration policy has failed to address and respond to this global crisis. Over the last several years, we have witnessed thousands of deportations—reflective of our broken political system as well as our broken immigration policy. Archbishop Cupich urged us to continue our advocacy work which helps keep the topic of immigration alive in the public

square and lets those who suffer within our broken system know that they are not alone. In Honduras, over 6000 children live on the streets. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are among the 5 most dangerous countries in the world and the violence is inescapable, with children forced to become the foot soldiers of the gangs and drug cartels. Police are either complicit or overwhelmed by the problems and unable to protect the most vulnerable. In 2014, over 68,000 unaccompanied youth crossed the southern US border, fleeing for their lives. We are called to put a human face on these statistics, insisting on an end to what the Pope calls “the globalization of indifference”. In this year named by Pope Francis as a holy year of mercy, forced migrations around the world are calling us to respond as a Catholic community with mercy, compassion, justice and love.

Our country is a country of immigrants, made great by the many newcomers to our land who come seeking freedom, hope and life. There are presently over 11 million undocumented immigrants here, over 21,000 border patrol officers on our southern border, over 130,000 detained immigrants, held mostly in jails and prisons awaiting deportation or hearings, and over 8,000 deaths in our southwest desert over the last couple of years. Our system is broken. Central to reform must be the value of keeping families together and a path to citizenship for those who have been here many years, contributing to US culture and economic development without any criminal record. A worker permit program is needed, as well as assistance in sustainable economic development in the sending countries, in order to make migration less necessary to survival. Border enforcement policies and procedures need to honor and respect human rights and the human dignity of immigrants, and once apprehended, due process needs to be assured.

The JFI meeting reminded all participants that immigrants are both a gift and an opportunity for our country. Immigrant integration is a process that creates the conditions for all to flourish by seeking unity between people through shared values embedded imperfectly in diverse cultures, rather than assimilation into one dominant culture. It is this richness that has continuously renewed and reshaped the US American character from our beginning. Over 25% of the US population today is immigrants. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.” Pope Francis has called for a “radical empathy” in dealing with the globalization of indifference. Here in the US we must continue to raise our voices for immigration reform. Justice and mercy demand it. In the meantime, let us reach out to immigrants in our neighborhoods, churches, schools, fields, farms and factories offering them assistance, solidarity, respect and hope. Let us reject the scapegoating of immigrants and refugees—the stereotyping that labels them potential terrorists and lawbreakers. Let us insist on an end to mass deportations that literally tear apart families, often removing the sole bread winner through deportation, leaving behind US citizen families who face an uncertain future along with heart wrenching separation from their loved one. Together let us continue to find ways to build vibrant communities in which diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, culture and age is cherished.