

**IMMIGRATION
ENFORCEMENT**

AND  **THE**

**CHRISTIAN
CONSCIENCE**

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

By Benjamin Mann

Introduction

With this new installment of *The Receipts*, a recurring series in CatholicVote's Catholic Accountability Project, we hope to begin a national conversation—calm, honest, and Catholic—about one of the most divisive issues of our time: immigration.

As Catholics, we start where the magisterium calls us to start: with the dignity of every immigrant and refugee. That is an undeniable common ground.

On that common ground, we can start addressing the questions that demand thoughtful attention. What do we, as a nation, owe to each citizen? To the stranger? The Church both requires us to see the face of Christ in every person and to define, through reasoning, what justice requires in each circumstance.

Chapter 1: The facts about immigration in America

By returning Donald Trump to the White House, the American people sent a clear message: the disaster at our southern border, and its [shockwave effects throughout the nation](#), cannot continue.

Under the leadership of President Biden and Vice President Harris, illegal immigration had skyrocketed beyond all precedent. Their catch-and-release policies resulted in roughly [11 million](#) nationwide encounters during fiscal years 2021-2024, 7.8 million of those at the southern border. Those numbers do not include approximately 2 million known “gotaways” who evaded capture during that period.

A [2023 House Judiciary report](#) found “virtually no enforcement of our immigration laws,” with “more than 99 percent of illegal aliens staying inside the United States after being released by the Biden Administration.”

As the election approached, public opinion turned decisively against Joe Biden and Kamala Harris - with [bipartisan acknowledgment](#) of the southern border crisis and [broad support](#) for much stronger immigration enforcement.

Poll respondents [rated immigration as a top concern](#), and said - unsurprisingly - they [trusted Trump over Harris](#) to handle it.

What matters most, of course, is not the popular will but the will of God - as expressed in the perennial teaching of the Catholic Church.

In the run-up to the 2024 election, CatholicVote's Catholic Accountability Project published its five-part [Bad Samaritans report](#), showing how Biden and Harris's hemorrhaging southern border was appalling from the standpoint of both faith and reason.

With Trump's second term, there is a new question facing the Church in America: *What does Catholic teaching tell us about immigration law enforcement, especially on the controversial issue of large-scale deportations?*

Catholics who advocate strong but humane immigration enforcement are sometimes accused of disobeying their bishops or the pope, and even violating Church teaching.

Properly speaking, there is no such thing as an *official* "Catholic position" on the practical details of immigration policy.

Despite what some Church [leaders](#) in America have [indicated](#), a faithful Catholic can support strong and humane immigration law enforcement - by means such as physical barriers, detention, and deportation - without violating the teaching of the Church.

Weak borders and lenient law enforcement are often presented as "humane" and "compassionate" policies demanded by Christian love. Yet the reality is that these policies frequently have a terrible human toll - such as when they enrich and empower the criminal cartels, clearly harming both Americans and foreigners in the process.

Such reckless border policies thereby violate both parts of a basic Catholic teaching, summed up in paragraph 409 of the Compendium of the Catechism: *"The most complete realization of the common good is found in those political communities which defend and promote the good of their citizens ... without forgetting the universal good of the entire human family."*

By 2024, human smuggling had become a [multibillion-dollar business](#) - a larger source of revenue for the cartels than drug smuggling, with this revenue fueling their international agenda of violence, exploitation, and corruption.

In fact, the cartels made much of this profit through activities they conducted openly and with direct cooperation from American border security officials under the direction of the Biden administration.

In May 2021, journalist [Todd Bensman](#) witnessed the cartels systematically ferrying illegal immigrants into Texas, before openly handing them off to cooperative US border agents. Bensman is now a [senior advisor](#) to "border czar" Tom Homan.

The resulting exploitation was appalling. For instance, there has been a practice of some illegal immigrants [cooperating with human smugglers to rent their own children to other immigrants](#),

allowing them to pose as a family for easier entrance into the catch-and-release system of non-enforcement. Some of these parents could not locate their children after the fraud was complete.

Likewise, there is the notorious [sexual exploitation of illegal immigrants](#) by those who smuggle them into the US, and other dangers that led a UN agency to name America's southern border as the [world's deadliest land route](#) for migrants in a 2023 report.

[Part 3 of CatholicVote's Bad Samaritans report](#) focused on harm to the American homeland, where the border crisis was truly "*A Crisis of Citizenship and the Rule of Law.*"

Although public officials must consider the good of humanity at large, the Catholic Church teaches that states must prioritize the good of their own people. This is conveyed clearly in paragraph 412 of the Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, which says:

"As an instrument of the State, public administration at any level ... is oriented towards the service of citizens. Being at the service of its citizens, the State is the steward of the people's resources, which it must administer with a view to the common good ... The role of those working in public administration is not to be conceived as impersonal or bureaucratic, but rather as an act of generous assistance for citizens, undertaken with a spirit of service" (emphases added).

An important means for keeping the state oriented to the good of its citizens is the *rule of law*, as taught in paragraph 408 of the Compendium of Social Doctrine. This principle means "the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of individuals." This can be achieved by a separation of powers within the state, implementing checks and balances that keep political power "within proper bounds."

In contrast with these principles of faith and reason, the southern border crisis showed what happens when a catch-and-release system replaces the rule of law, and immigrants' interests are placed above those of citizens.

Chapter 2: Myths and facts about immigration and the Church

Catholic teaching on immigration is often misunderstood - and some of this misunderstanding, unfortunately, has come from within the Church. An ideological immigration lobby has sought to present amnesty, minimal law enforcement, and more legal immigration as the only acceptable position for Catholics.

As a result, many people mistakenly think that Catholics cannot demand secure borders and the enforcement of our immigration laws. There is a widespread perception that the Church is formally committed to the immigration lobby's view.

It is worth noting that Catholic immigration lobbyists often try to disavow the word “amnesty,” preferring to speak of “earned legalization” or a “path to citizenship.” In popular usage, however, this distinction is irrelevant, and the lobby is for amnesty.

Essentially, what the lobby believes is this: with amnesty and more legal immigration, as well as measures like foreign aid, illegal immigration could become a minimal problem - with a correspondingly minimal need for detention and deportation, to be used only in extreme cases.

Often this agenda is presented as the *only* position in accord with Scripture and Church teaching.

This leaves us with the delicate task of criticizing certain political views offered by some Catholic voices. As we will show, however, this is not an act of disobedience or disrespect toward the Church hierarchy, but a legitimate difference of opinion according to magisterial teaching.

Donald Kerwin, for instance, is a [leading voice in the lobby](#) who edited the book [And You Welcomed Me](#). In a [paper for the Migration Policy Institute](#), Kerwin claims to summarize the “Church Position on Migration Policy.”

In this document, Kerwin falsely attributes the positions of the immigration lobby to the entire Catholic Church, such as when he states: *“The church does not believe that criminal prosecution and deportation of unauthorized immigrants offer a viable, much less a humane, approach to the problem.”*

Kerwin also claims that “the church” is “particularly offended” by a so-called “disconnect between U.S. labor needs, trade policies, and immigration admission levels.” In other words, Kerwin claims that the demand for more immigrant labor is an official stance of the Catholic Church, not merely the view of the lobby he represents.

As a result of such statements, there is a fog of misunderstanding around immigration and law enforcement within the Catholic Church.

The truth is that faithful Catholics can certainly disagree with the anti-enforcement position - even if some bishops happen to share the policy preferences of these activists. Such disagreement is not a dissent from Church teaching.

In fact, recent popes have emphasized that the Catholic Church has no “official position” on the practical details of issues like immigration policy.

Rather, our faith teaches a set of broad moral principles about immigration, and their application in public life is a matter of practical judgment for laypersons.

Nothing in this report supports an act of disobedience toward the pope or the bishops according to canon law. As the Code of Canon Law states in [canon 212](#), we fully intend to

“follow with Christian obedience those things which the sacred pastors, inasmuch as they represent Christ, declare as teachers of the faith or establish as rulers of the Church.”

The same canon says the lay faithful, according to their own knowledge and competence, “have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful.”

First, the Church teaches that every state’s most basic duty is to seek the good of its own citizens. This is taught by [paragraph 1903](#) in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and made clearer in section 412 of the [Compendium of Social Doctrine](#). Both documents use very strong language to convey this basic principle.

Based on Scripture and sound moral reasoning, the Church teaches that there is a basic right to leave one’s country and settle elsewhere for serious reasons, such as physical safety or truly compelling economic need. This right implies a duty for states to accept those in such need, as long as this is compatible with the common good of the receiving country.

If one reflects on the plight of those truly suffering persecution or extreme economic hardship, it is not difficult to understand why the Church says they must be able to leave these conditions in search of their basic needs, with states accommodating them to the extent reasonably possible. This teaching has a [solid foundation in Scripture and tradition](#).

Unfortunately, the principle of the right to migrate is also easily misunderstood in our current political context.

The right of migration does *not* mean that *any person*, under *any circumstance*, has the right of migration to *any country* - as if the world should simply have open borders that would constitute no real borders at all.

More specifically, the right of migration does not mean that immigrants are entitled to their top choice of destination. If they are truly fleeing persecution or seeking to meet basic human needs, it is entirely reasonable for them to seek these things in countries that are geographically and culturally closer to their place of origin.

Likewise, Catholic doctrine is not a standing open invitation for vast numbers of people from poor and turbulent areas to occupy places that are more peaceful or prosperous to the point that these host countries themselves become dangerous and destabilized, coming to resemble the very places these immigrants once fled from.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 2241 [teaches](#) that “political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions.” In less technical language, this means that *nations have the right to regulate migration, by making and enforcing immigration laws*.

The same paragraph of the Catechism says nations have a duty to accept immigrants who are genuinely in need - but only *"to the extent they are able"* to welcome these foreigners while still pursuing their own common good.

No state is ever required to welcome immigrants in a way that would jeopardize the safety, security, or overall well-being of its own people. Indeed, such a policy would actually be immoral in the eyes of the Church, which teaches that the most basic duty of states is to their own people.

In a stark warning, [paragraph 1903 of the Catechism](#) says that authorities who violate this principle - by failing to seek the good of those they govern - are committing a "shameful abuse" and undermining their own legitimacy.

The Catechism [also teaches](#) that immigrants are "obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens."

Logically, this obligation for immigrants to obey other countries' laws includes their *immigration laws*.

It is true that the Church's teaching on civil law is [nuanced in some respects](#), and some immigration laws could hypothetically lack validity. Nonetheless, governments always have a basic right to control their borders and regulate immigration - and this right is to be respected by those seeking entry, as well as by public officials responsible for [enforcing the law](#).

On the human level, false asylum claims have the effect of unjustly diverting resources away from the adjudication of valid and truthful claims. American asylum law is meant specifically to protect [those facing persecution](#), not economic migrants who fraudulently claim this to exploit the goodwill of Americans.

Fundamentally, Catholic teaching on migration involves both the right of individuals to immigrate for grave reasons and the right of states to restrict migration for their own essential purposes. There are serious rights and duties on both sides, and it is not a simple matter to say what specific policies will ultimately achieve the best outcomes in reality.

In short, it is a matter of prudential political judgment, an area of responsibility that belongs properly to Catholic laypersons rather than the bishops. This is actually an authoritative teaching of the Church in its own right, affirmed both by the Second Vatican Council and recent popes.

In paragraph 13 of its [decree on the mission of laypersons](#), Vatican II teaches that "the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives, is *so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others*" (emphasis added).

Likewise, [another Vatican II document](#) - *Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 13 - teaches that "secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively" to laypersons. Such duties would include the formulation of immigration policy.

In the words of that document, the laity should not expect the bishops to give them "a concrete solution" to "every problem that arises" - which, according to the council, is not the mission of the clergy. Instead, Vatican II teaches: "*Enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.*"

"Clericalism" is an important term in this regard. While the meaning of this word is not always precise, it has [sometimes been used](#) to refer to a false conception of how authority works in the Catholic Church.

Rightly understood, Church authority does *not* mean that the pope and bishops simply dictate everything, to a purely passive laity whose role is merely to "pay, pray, and obey." Clericalism is a useful term for this misconception.

St. Paul VI, who oversaw the completion of Vatican II, was especially emphatic about the falsehood of this clericalist concept. Instead, he stressed that there is a realm of initiative and independent judgment proper to the laity, especially in public and civic life.

"If the role of the Hierarchy is to teach and to interpret authentically the norms of morality to be followed in this matter," Pope Paul VI wrote, "it belongs to the laymen, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live." That statement is a clear synopsis of what Vatican II taught about this division of responsibilities.

St. John Paul II [made the basic distinction even clearer](#) when he noted that "*the Church does not propose economic and political systems or programs.*"

Accordingly, while popes and bishops may sometimes express an opinion on specific "systems and programs," the Catechism's paragraph 1806 makes it clear that such practicalities are the proper domain of Catholic laypersons - applying their faith, reason, and the [virtue of prudence](#).

It is certainly true that the pope and bishops have a unique God-given teaching authority both in matters of revealed faith and moral truth. However, there is often a difference between the moral teachings of the Church and their *prudential application* - that is, how this teaching should be practically applied in cases where different legitimate options exist.

If the pope or the bishops express their own opinions on matters of practical political judgment, they should be taken seriously. But one may conscientiously reach a different conclusion about how best to apply their moral teaching, without in any way dissenting from

that teaching. Prudential applications of Catholic doctrine are [not the same thing as the doctrine itself](#).

To be sure, not everything in politics is a prudential judgment. There are actions that the state is absolutely forbidden to take under all circumstances, thereby removing some policy choices from the realm of prudential judgment. These actions are described as *intrinsic evils*.

There are different ways in which a government policy can cross the line to become intrinsically evil. [Some political proposals](#) involve a goal that can never be legitimate - for instance, when those in power seek to redefine marriage, restrict genuine religious freedom, or treat abortion as a right. Other intrinsically evil policies may aim for a valid goal but through the use of means that are inherently immoral - such as the [nuclear bombing of cities](#) or the [use of torture](#).

When the pope and the bishops teach with authority on these matters of intrinsic evil, they are not offering policy proposals or their own political opinions, even if the teaching has political implications. Rather, they are acting as teachers of faith and morals, to warn all of society - and especially the faithful - against political ends or means that can never be morally legitimate.

Of course, there is much more to good policy than the avoidance of intrinsic evils. Nonetheless, it is crucial to understand that the basic toolkit of immigration enforcement involves nothing that the Church teaches to be inherently wrong.

Physical barriers such as walls are not intrinsic evils, nor is it inherently wrong to enforce immigration laws through detention and deportation. If such measures *were* inherently immoral, then states would not have the practical means to enforce their immigration laws, as the Catechism clearly says they have the right to do. It would be absurd to say that states have this right, and then deny them the most basic means of exercising it.

While some Catholics have [suggested](#) that John Paul II considered the deportation of illegal immigrants to be intrinsically evil, it is clear from the context and his teaching as a whole - including his [issuing of the Catechism](#) - that this was not his meaning.

Indeed, it is especially absurd to claim that deporting illegal aliens is an intrinsic evil - since a state that lacked the right to physically remove these immigrants would, in effect, have to grant permanent residence to all of them. That is certainly not the teaching of the Church.

Rather, like all other law enforcement, immigration enforcement and border security can be carried out in a moral manner.

On a broader level, there is nothing inherently immoral about seeking to deter illegal immigration by means of law enforcement. According to paragraph [2266](#) of the Catechism, "defending public order" is among the valid purposes of punishment, along with rehabilitation and public safety.

Likewise, whether to grant amnesty and citizenship to illegal immigrants is clearly a prudential judgment - not a matter of intrinsic evil either way. The same can be said about the question of whether there should be more immigration permitted by law.

Pope Pius XII summed up the prudential nature of this question when he [addressed a US Senate committee on immigration in 1947](#): *"As always the welfare of the country must be considered as well as the interest of the individual seeking to enter, and in the nature of things circumstances will at times dictate a law of restriction."* Pius XII was a [strong advocate](#) for the right of migration, yet he was also frank about its limits.

Statements from individual Church leaders in America and abroad have also added to the confusion, particularly when they draw a moral equivalency between President Trump's immigration policy and, for example, the Democratic Party's pro-abortion platform. From the documents and principles cited in this report, it should be clear that the consistent teaching of the Church does not support such an equivalency.

To say a political issue is subject to prudential judgment is not to trivialize the substance of that judgment. Prudence is a [cardinal virtue](#) - it is never a cover for mere partisan groupthink or arbitrary personal preference.

God has given the laity grave responsibilities, not a blank check. We must truly form and exercise our conscience to determine how the Church's authoritative moral teaching can best be applied in society.

Pope St. John XXIII spoke of the need to ["look, judge, and act"](#) on social issues. In 2024, many American Catholics saw the gravity of our border and immigration crisis and understood the need for a serious response. We voted for Donald Trump and J.D. Vance, understanding that they would [deport many illegal immigrants](#) and [encourage others to leave voluntarily](#).

Law enforcement and deterrence cannot be footnotes in the immigration debate. While Americans generally have compassion for those who came here unlawfully, we also understand that a nation's laws and borders are critically important. They must not become ineffective and meaningless.

America's most recent attempt at "comprehensive immigration reform" and a "path to citizenship" was in 1986 under President Reagan. This law granted citizenship to nearly 3 million illegal residents, and was supposed to be a one-time amnesty in return for definitive border security. Hence its name: the "Immigration Reform and Control Act."

But the final version of the law lacked critical enforcement provisions that would have truly deterred future illegal immigrants and those who hired them. Far from "reform and control," it led to decades of continuing crisis.

Meanwhile, today's immigration activists do not claim to offer a secure border in return for the far larger amnesty they seek. They invite our nation to blindly repeat its mistakes.

Chapter 3: A Catholic response to the anti-enforcement position

Our faith teaches the broad moral principle of a right to immigrate for serious reasons - but Catholic doctrine also teaches that governments have a primary duty to their own people, which includes the right to make and enforce immigration laws.

From the Church's own teaching, it is clear that the specifics of migration policy are a matter of prudential judgment - a matter for the well-formed conscience of laypersons, not a question that can simply be resolved by the pope or the bishops.

It is actually *immoral* in the eyes of the Church for a country to accept immigrants to the detriment of its own citizens. This is a clear implication of paragraph [1903](#) in the Catechism, which teaches that government must *always* seek the common good of the governed. A state is said to act *illegitimately* if it neglects the good of its own people.

Taking all of these principles together, the divine commandment to "welcome the stranger" must not be twisted into a simplistic slogan for more liberal immigration policies.

It is true that a nation would violate Church teaching if it simply refused to admit immigrants that it could reasonably accommodate while still pursuing the common good of its own citizens. There should be a basic willingness to accept foreigners to the extent reasonably possible.

But the debate over immigration in America today is not a debate about *whether* to accept immigrants. Rather, it is a debate over *what the country can, in fact, reasonably accommodate* while seeking the common good of citizens. More than a legitimate concern, this question is *mandatory* in the eyes of the Church.

It is also crucial to understand that the United States already does a remarkable job of "welcoming the stranger" through its *legal immigration system*.

America has the [largest foreign-born population of any country in the world](#), and the competition is not even remotely close - Germany, in second place, has about a third of our 50.6 million. Immigrants now make up 15 percent of the US population, the [highest share in US history](#). While some of these statistics include illegal immigrants, the number of legal immigrants in America is still quite high, both as an absolute number and relative to the rest of the world.

America's problem is not an unwillingness to welcome strangers, as we [clearly receive a great many](#). Certainly, there are - and probably always will be - more "strangers" seeking admission

than our current laws provide for. But this does not automatically mean we must welcome an even greater number or grant amnesty to illegals.

These are all matters of prudential judgment, and the Church does not propose one simple answer. The [words of Christ](#) in the Gospel of Matthew 24:35-40 should not be twisted into a political bumper sticker to suggest otherwise.

Similarly, it is often argued that if we “see the presence of Christ in the migrants,” we will refrain from enforcing our laws and protecting our borders.

Certainly, we should reflect on the vast significance of Matthew 25, where Christ identifies Himself with the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned. Indeed, the implications of this passage apply to all people - including those left poor, forgotten, unemployed, and the victims of crime. It is a call to build what St. John Paul II called a “civilization of love.”

A civilization, however, must have principles of law and order - and the Church has never taught that these principles should be abolished in the name of Christian love. Ultimately, a society that refuses to enforce just laws will undermine and violate the very dignity it claims to defend.

The argument about “seeing Christ in immigrants” fails to address the real political issue, sidestepping it in favor of an appeal to Christian love. But that principle could be used to argue both sides of the issue - which should tell us that it is not the principle best suited to resolving the problem.

Certainly, Christians are required to [exercise divine charity toward all people](#) (Corinthians 13:2). To this end, we should recognize [every person](#) as someone for whom Christ died, and consider all human suffering as [mysteriously related in some way](#) to the Passion of Christ. Our love, concern, and compassion must be universal.

None of this, however, means closing our eyes to the real and potential harms of illegal immigration or imprudent migration policy. Christian love does not always mean lenient law enforcement or the pursuit of amnesty. At times, it may require just the opposite.

One problem with appealing to Christian love as a basis for lenient immigration policies is that we must also have that same love for those who stand to be harmed by those policies.

In His final judgment of the world, Christ may indeed identify Himself with an immigrant whose dignity we disregarded. Yet by the very same principle, it seems equally true that He may hold some of us responsible for the [lives](#) and [livelihoods](#) we irresponsibly allowed some illegal immigrants to take. Matthew 25 suggests both possibilities - because it pertains to all kinds of injustice, regardless of what is politically fashionable.

In short, since Christians are to love *everyone without exception*, Christian love alone is not a sufficient principle for reasoning through the vital issue of who belongs in a country.

After all, the Catechism's paragraph [1503](#) speaks of the Lord's "compassion for all who suffer" - and it is undeniable that some Americans suffer tragically at the hands of illegal immigrants.

We need to speak of "seeing Christ" also in the many [drunk-driving victims](#), [gang targets](#), or [economically slighted citizens](#). This means refraining from making a one-sided argument about the "[presence of Christ in the migrant](#)."

A more serious argument offered against stronger immigration enforcement is to oppose illegal alien deportation on the grounds that it can cause families to be physically separated, especially in cases of "mixed status" families whose children are currently considered US citizens.

Importantly, this objection does *not* relate to so-called "[family separation policies](#)" - which are an entirely different issue, relating to how illegal immigrants are detained.

Rather, despite the similar language, this objection has to do with a different and more ordinary problem: that is, the problem of some illegal immigrants being deported, even while their children and other family members may remain in the US.

Activists often appeal to "family unity" as a reason for minimal immigration enforcement - even invoking it as a "[fundamental right](#)," with the implication that any deportation that affects a family in this way is a grave injustice.

However, this argument is untenable in the broader context of Church teaching - which upholds family unity, but also acknowledges some important limits to this right.

To be sure, family unity is a serious matter in moral theology. A "[Charter of the Rights of the Family](#)," issued by the Holy See under St. John Paul II, affirmed that "the family, a natural society, exists prior to the State or any other community, and possesses inherent rights." It also stated that governments "must protect the family through measures of a political, economic, social and juridical character, which aim at consolidating the unity and stability of the family."

At first glance, this might suggest that the US government must refrain from deporting illegal immigrants if this will physically separate them from family members.

Yet this reading is ultimately unsustainable, and such deportations may indeed be legitimate - especially if they are needed to protect the common good of a country's own citizens, which the Catechism sets out as the most basic standard of political legitimacy.

Bearing this principle in mind, there are several specific weaknesses in the "family unity" argument.

First, it should be noted that *all* law enforcement very often causes some form of disruption to family life through physical separation - not only in cases of deportation but through the ordinary process of imprisonment that often follows many kinds of legal convictions.

In this regard, there is no essential difference between a prison sentence for other offenses and the deportation of illegal immigrants. If legitimate law enforcement is disruptive to family life, the responsibility lies with those family members who broke the law.

Incarceration may be just as disruptive to family life as deportation, yet the Church does not condemn serious prison sentences as an inherent attack on the family. Rather, the Holy See's charter merely says families must be able to remain in contact with the imprisoned member and be "adequately sustained" in some way while the punishment is served. All of this strongly suggests that family unity is not a sufficient argument against deportation, either.

Another form of government action that disrupts family life, while being explicitly allowed by the Church, is military conscription. Pope Pius XII [clearly taught](#) that states have the right to draft civilians to serve as soldiers - and the US bishops echoed this very teaching [in a later statement](#), acknowledging the "right of the state to call citizens to acts of legitimate defense."

A military draft will cause hardship for all families involved, and irreparable loss for some. Yet the Church allows states to impose mandatory service under certain conditions, despite the toll it will take on families.

Overall, we can conclude that the Church does not object *in principle* to government actions that may seriously disrupt the life of a family if there is a serious justification grounded in the common good.

Moreover, in weighing the argument from family unity, we should note that a policy of refusing to deport illegal immigrants with American-born children would have grave unintended consequences. In effect, such an approach would turn children into a permanent residence visa, a massive loophole that would be readily exploited and severely undermine the rule of law.

Finally, we must address the assertion that America has a so-called "[broken immigration system](#)" - a common claim by Catholic immigration lobbyists and their secular counterparts.

Of course, a truly broken system should be fixed. But the "broken system" talking point is typically a setup for the pitch of so-called "comprehensive immigration reform" - meaning mass amnesty, for starters.

When immigration activists in the Church use this language, they are usually signalling their typical trifecta: not only amnesty, but also more legal immigration and less law enforcement.

By their interpretation of “welcoming the stranger,” it is hard to imagine *any* number of immigrants they would realistically regard as too many, or *any* societal condition they would see as calling for consistent law enforcement.

Whatever reservations might be expressed in theory, their “comprehensive reform” agenda in practice is virtually always a program of minimal enforcement, more immigrants, and amnesty - with anything else deemed to be a “broken system.”

Yet if America’s immigration system can be called “broken” just because more people want to come here than the law currently allows, then it is hard to realistically imagine any situation in which the system will not be “broken.”

As long as the US remains a relatively successful and peaceful country, it will *always* attract more immigrants than it could reasonably admit.

A [2021 Gallup survey](#) found that almost *a billion* people wanted to migrate to another country, with around 20 percent giving the US as their top choice. According to Gallup, that percentage was consistently even *higher* in *all* years before 2017. This is a world in which the number of people seeking to live here will *always* be higher than the number who reasonably could.

If such an imbalance indicates a “broken system,” then it is a system that could hardly be “fixed” except by breaking the *country* - that is, by letting in new immigrants by the *hundreds of millions*, causing immense social turmoil and an impossible burden on government resources.

One can argue that the United States should admit a larger number of legal immigrants. But with hundreds of millions wishing to come to America, no one can reasonably argue that the immigration system is “broken” because it fails to give virtually all of them the opportunity. This imbalance of demand and supply will exist under *any* acceptable immigration policy.

Ultimately, the assertion of a “broken system” is not so much a serious argument as a political catchphrase. In practice, it has become a strategically vague way of advocating for controversial policies - such as amnesty and more legal immigration - under the equally vague language of “comprehensive reform.”

The slogan of a “broken system” has been notably opposed by [Temple University Law Professor Jan Ting](#), an immigration expert who has testified before Congress several times. According to Ting, America does not have a “broken immigration system” - rather, the country suffers from an unwillingness to make difficult choices on a sensitive issue.

In 2014, Ting [told the Senate Judiciary Committee](#): “*I believe that what’s broken is our willingness to make the hard choice between simply allowing unlimited immigration, as we did for the first century of the republic, or alternatively enforcing a numerical limit on immigration, with all the attendant difficulty, complexity and expense that entails.*”

In Ting's view, many politicians and voters have sought an impossible third way between limited and unlimited immigration. *"We can pretend we have a numerical limit, keep it on the books, but not enforce it. And whenever that policy choice produces a large number of illegal immigrants, we can just enact a big amnesty or legalization."*

Ting [has described](#) this pretense of law as *"a formula for permanent dysfunction."*

At the same time, no one has responded adequately to objections like those [expressed by the Heritage Foundation](#), when it notes: *"Amnesty comes in many forms, but in all its variations, it discourages respect for the law, treats law-breaking aliens better than law-following aliens, and encourages future unlawful immigration into the United States."*

Granted, it is still theoretically possible to argue for those policies that favor more legal immigration, mass amnesty, and a liberal use of law enforcement discretion in immigrants' favor. Authentic Church teaching leaves these questions open to reasonable debate, however, and we believe there is a far more solid case for stronger enforcement and borders.

We support the restoration of our borders and laws, not from any sort of un-Christian bigotry, but out of the virtue of patriotism. In the [words of St. John Paul II](#), the love of country involves a "serious duty" to defend against "every danger that threatens the overall good of our native land."

We accept the principle of asylum - but only for truly persecuted people, not for the large number of opportunistic perjurers seeking to game the system through grave sin.

Fundamentally, we understand our country as [far more than an economic arrangement](#). A sustainable culture and cohesive society cannot be achieved if we treat the nation as merely a free-market opportunity zone - or a left-wing welfare trough. Both views of society are [rejected by the Church](#).

Consequently, America's role in the world cannot simply be to give everyone maximum access to our prosperity. Without neglecting the global common good, every country must seriously face the question of who it can, or cannot, reasonably accommodate. [Self-righteous slogans](#) will never resolve this question.

While remaining open to some legal immigration, we would like to find prudent ways of [exporting America's success](#), not [importing other countries' failures](#). Indeed, a country is best poised to benefit other nations when it puts its own people first - creating the conditions of abundance.

St. Thomas Aquinas summed things up well in his [commentary](#) on Matthew 5:7 when he explained the need for both mercy and justice. *"Justice without mercy leads to cruelty,"* he wrote, *"mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution."*

Deportation and other essential law enforcement must be done respectfully and never with cruelty. In this sense, mercy is an essential consideration. Yet so is justice, because we cannot risk the further dissolution of order.

America must restore the rule of law, put citizens first, and rebuild public trust in its institutions. The unchecked collapse of our southern border has [inflicted grave harm](#) on human dignity - on migrants, on communities, and on the moral fabric of the nation.

CatholicVote is America's top Catholic advocacy organization, leading the fight for faith, family, and freedom. Its mission is to inspire every Catholic in America to live out the truths of the Catholic faith in public life.

This report is available at:
catholicvote.org/report/immigration-enforcement-and-the-christian-conscience

