Resettlement policy: Create a welcoming society, not more barriers, for refugees

A message from Catholic and Lutheran bishops in Minnesota.

By CATHOLIC and LUTHERAN BISHOPS OF MINNESOTA

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“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”
MATTHEW 25

In this holy season, as we prepare to welcome friends and family into our homes, we are given new reason to reflect on our calling to welcome the stranger. Specifically, what is our calling to welcome immigrants and refugees?

The question has taken on new urgency this year as a result of Executive Order 13888, issued on Sept. 26. The order requires consent from state and local governments for federal resettlement of refugees in their area. Consent must be given within 90 days — by Dec. 25.

The new order seems to unnecessarily politicize what has been a humanitarian program rooted in our nation’s long history of resettling families fleeing from life-threatening dangers. We are also troubled by the decision to set a limit of 18,000 refugees in 2020, the lowest number in 40 years.

We are saddened that as Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ — who himself experienced life as a refugee when his family fled to Egypt — our nation may be creating even more hardships for vulnerable refugee families. We, the Lutheran and Catholic bishops of Minnesota, invite our members, our political leaders and all of goodwill to prayerfully consider the following reflections.

In our traditions, Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of Jesus both at Christmas and at the end of time. But it also challenges us to welcome him when he comes to us in other ways, particularly through the people we encounter every day. Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore imbued with a sacred dignity we must respect and protect. This is especially true when it comes to the poor and vulnerable.

We acknowledge that resettlement can bring new challenges for our communities.

That uneasiness is real.
Yet, the world is experiencing the largest displacement of persons in human history. Our nation’s refugee policy is one way to demonstrate our values by following a common moral exhortation in the Bible: to welcome the stranger in our midst.

We fear the executive order will create further hardship for refugees by delaying the resolution of their cases, dividing extended families and placing additional strains on the resettlement system. While we support local engagement, refugee resettlement agencies are already working closely with state and local officials as well as community stakeholders to facilitate this process, and we foresee a host of practical problems that would arise if states and municipalities were given a veto over refugee resettlement.

We would like to address a few specific groups directly regarding their duties related to this issue:

**To our refugee sisters and brothers:** We stand with you as you start new lives in this country. You have escaped terrible situations of persecution and violence, leaving your homes and livelihoods to face an uncertain future. We know you are eager to live in safety with your families, find employment and become integral, contributing members of your local communities. We pledge our support, promise to be your advocates and trust that we will be mutually enriched as we come to know each other’s culture and experiences. We ask you to be patient with those for whom your presence presents a challenge.

**To our elected officials:** We thank Gov. Tim Walz for expressing his support of resettlement, indicating that “the inn is not full in Minnesota,” and we ask our mayors and county elected officials to also publicly express support for refugee resettlement. The assistance we offer refugees is repaid through the talents they share and their economic participation in the life of our communities. Rather than posing a threat to our values or our way of life, most refugees seek to build a better life and contribute to the vibrancy of their new homeland. We ask that you become their advocates, too.

**To those who support refugee resettlement:** Please don’t demonize those who are opposed. We need to build bridges of dialogue instead of walls of resentment.

**To our congregations and those of goodwill:** Pray for refugees and voice your support for them to our elected leaders. Reflect on ways you or your church congregation can assist them and other newcomers and how we can together address the fears and misconceptions that are all too common in these situations.

**To those who are challenged by the influx of refugees:** We invite you to seek to encounter them, learn their stories and work to see them as God sees them — as sons and daughters.

In sum, the reduced cap on the number of refugees as well as the executive order lack the mercy, compassion and justice that are not only called for by the Gospel but that also should be expected from a strong and historically diverse nation. Although we feel Executive Order 13888 should be rescinded, the fact remains that the 90-day deadline stipulated in the executive order is Dec. 25
— Christmas. Although the impact will not take effect until several months into 2020, it is urgent that our community and elected officials respond right away.

We can and must do better to create a welcoming society for those most in need.

This article was submitted on behalf of bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Thomas Aitken, bishop, Northeastern Minnesota Synod; Jon V. Anderson, bishop, Southwestern Minnesota Synod; Regina M. Hassalany, bishop, Southeastern Minnesota Synod; Patricia Lull, bishop, Saint Paul Area Synod; Ann Svennungsen, bishop, Minneapolis Area Synod; William T. Tesch, bishop, Northwestern Minnesota Synod. Also submitted on behalf of leaders of the Roman Catholic Church: Bernard A. Hebda, archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis; Michael J. Hoeppner, bishop of Crookston; Donald J. Kettler, bishop of Saint Cloud; John M. LeVoir, bishop of New Ulm; John M. Quinn, bishop of Winona-Rochester, and Andrew H. Cozzens, auxiliary bishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.