

Timely Topics for Faith Formation

January 6, 2010

Fourteen million people. That's slightly more than the population of the entire state of Ohio. And that's approximately how many people are currently living as **refugees** in our world today.

The Catholic Church in the United States observes **National Migration Week on January 3-9, 2010**. With fourteen million lives at stake, however, the need to learn about, understand, and reach out to these brothers and sisters of ours extends far beyond one week in January.

The focus of the 2010 *World Day of Migrants and Refugees* is on refugee and migrant children, in accord with Pope Benedict XVI's theme, "Minor Migrants and Refugees". Children are particularly vulnerable, as they often may be both undocumented and unaccompanied, and thus unprotected, in a foreign land, where they easily become prey to all kinds of abuse and exploitation.



As Catholic Christians with deep roots in Judaism, we have a long tradition of caring for refugees and migrants. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures repeatedly remind us:

- You will not molest or oppress the alien, for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt. You will not ill-treat widows or orphans . . . *Ex 22:20,21; 23:9*
- If you have resident aliens in your country, you will not molest them. You will treat resident aliens as though they were native-born and love them as yourself – for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt. *Lev 19:33, 34; also Deut 10:18, 19; 24:19*
- Remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it. *Heb 13:2*

The North American system of Catholic schools (in both Canada and the U.S.) grew largely out of the needs of the various **migrant** groups that arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many religious communities were recruited or founded to teach the children of Irish, German, French, Polish and Italian immigrants, among others.

In the 20th century, North America became more and more the destination of **refugees**, those forced to seek a place of asylum. "Convention Refugees" are recognized as those



- who have fled their countries of origin and
- who fit the definition of the UN's 1948 Geneva Convention:
"A well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

In recent years some broader considerations also have been applied, depending on circumstances.

The USCCB's Department of **Migration and Refugee Services** has a long history of aiding with the resettlement of refugees; in fact, it is the largest refugee-serving NGO (non-governmental agency) in the U.S.

Following these links an [in-service](#) suggestion and excellent [educational materials and resources](#) provided by the USCCB and by the internationally focused Jesuit Refugee Services.



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Inservice on Migration and Refugee Awareness

Post a map of the world on a corkboard or wall. Have available a small box of straight-pins, the kind with the vari-colored heads. Run off individual copies (or post a large copy) of the following prayer:

*Gracious God,
Through your great love for us, you became one of us
in the person of your beloved Son, Jesus.
As a Child he was forced to flee with his mother, Mary, and St. Joseph to Egypt,
to escape death at the hand of Herod.
Today we call to mind the millions of men, women and children
who are forced to live as migrants and refugees.
Teach us to recognize the face of your Son:*

*In the refugee seeking protection from persecution, war and famine
In the woman and child who are victims of human trafficking
In the asylum seeker fleeing without documents
In the migrant who labors to provide food for all of us*

May all who are far from home find in your Church a safe refuge where no one is a stranger.

We ask this, trusting in your love for all your children,

Amen

(adapted from USCCB, 2006)

- Use the front page of **Timely Topics** as background for introducing awareness of the Church's commitment to refugees and migrants.
- Recall that all of us, unless we are of Native American heritage, are the children of migrants and refugees. Ask if anyone knows the circumstances that led to his/her family coming to North America (brief sharing).
- Invite each participant to take a straight-pin and pin-point on the map the place of origin of his/her family.
- Conclude by praying together the above prayer.

Related Activities

- Invite learners of any age to investigate the stories of their families' coming to North America. They could interview older family members (audio or video tape) or tell their own stories to share with the group
- Ask if anyone in the group can pray the *Our Father* or *Hail Mary* in a language other than English; invite individuals to teach a few lines to the group
- Make posters with the two prayers (above) written out in as many first-languages as there are among the group's members

- Invite learners to visit ethnic/cultural parishes other than their own and report back on the experience
- Teens/adults: research the United Nation's 1948 *Geneva Convention on Human Rights*, the 1951 *Refugee Convention* and its 1967 *Protocol*, and the UNHCR (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*); see www.unhcr.org/
Relate what you learn above to the Church's social teaching regarding refugees and migrants (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #297-298, #301, and references)
- Explore local groups/agencies that provide assistance to refugees and migrants. Is there a way for your group to respond?

Resources

Go to the USCCB website at <http://www.usccb.org/> and click on the banner-heading for *National Migration Week*. You will find links for

- 2010 resources
- Refugee resources
- Immigration resources
- Children
- Cultural diversity

Each link will take you to a wealth of information and materials. You also can go there directly at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/nmw/>

The link to the *Jesuit Refugee Services* (or a direct connection at www.jrsusa.org/) provides abundant materials, including a complete course-curriculum suitable for upper elementary and beyond.

www.usccb.org/scdc/ takes you to the page for the USCCB's committee on *Cultural Diversity in the Church*, with a link to "Pastoral Care of Migrants & Refugees" at www.usccb.org/pcmrt/

USCCB. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York, NY: Image Books, 1997 (#2241)

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005 (#297-298, 301)

USCCB, Migration and Refugee Services. *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006 (complete educational packet)

Statement of the US Catholic Bishops: *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000

Mieth, Dietmar and Kisa Sowle Cahill, ed. *Migrants and Refugees, Concilium 1993-4*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. See Crusemann, Frank. "You know the Heart of a Stranger (Exodus 23:9): A Recollection of the Torah in the Face of New Nationalism and Xenophobia." pp. 95-109