

Corporal Works of Mercy – Respecting Life through “Visiting the Imprisoned”

“For I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:36)

The Corporal Work of Mercy, *Visit the Imprisoned*, calls us to help those confined by fear, sadness, illness or as prisoners. In the United States, this work of mercy is connected to the complex issue of immigration – which is changing the face of cultures around the world – because undocumented status often results in imprisonment leading to deportation.

According to government estimates, there are approximately 11.1 million people in the U.S. who are undocumented immigrants. Of these, 1.8 million are children. Undocumented immigrants are individuals who enter the country without proper paperwork or who overstay their visas. Many come to the U.S. to reunite their families or escape poverty in their home countries, working low-skilled jobs that do not require high school diplomas. Our economy depends on their labor. However, most low-skilled workers have no legal way to immigrate to the United States. The 5,000 low-skilled worker visas the U.S. issues each year falls far short of the economic demand for such workers in the agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and hospitality sectors.

How does *Visiting the Imprisoned* relate to immigration? According to Homeland Security’s *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 613,003 undocumented immigrants were apprehended by Border Patrol or placed under administrative arrest by Immigration & Customs Enforcement in 2009. The vast majority of these individuals did not commit crimes beyond being in the country without proper documentation. Among the detained are asylum seekers, victims of torture and human trafficking, families with young children, pregnant women, the elderly and infirm.

The Church recognizes there must be a careful balance between rights of migrants who move due to economic necessity, and rights of sovereign states to protect and govern their borders. Catholic social teaching provides the foundation for the Church’s position on immigration. The U.S. Catholic bishops outlined five basic principles in the 2003 pastoral document *Strangers No Longer*. This is intended to provide guidance for Catholics as they think about the issues surrounding illegal immigration, migrants, refugees and other people on the move:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homelands.
2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
5. The human dignity and human rights of all migrants should be respected.

There are many ways to address matters of charity and justice related to the detention of undocumented immigrants (and the complexities surrounding immigration issues more broadly). For the extended version of this article and to learn what steps you can take for *Visiting the Imprisoned*, go to the Social Justice Committee's section of St. Stan's website: www.ststans.org.