

# National Migration Week

September 18-24, 2023

In today's world, the plight of migrants and refugees stands out as a pressing global issue. The World Day of Migrants and Refugees (WDMR) is an opportunity for the global church and the Catholic faithful to engage in prayer, reflection, and action on behalf of our brothers and sisters who are forced to flee their homes. National Migration Week is a uniquely US-based celebration that builds on the ideas put forth in WDMR.

This year's WDMR theme, "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay," shines a light on the root causes that drive migration. In many instances, war and conflict have left people with no option but to abandon their homes and seek safety elsewhere. The Syrian conflict, for example, displaced millions, creating one of the largest refugee crises in modern history. More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine displaced hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom fled to neighboring countries in search of safety. In both cases, migration is not a choice, but a necessity for survival.

Yet armed conflict is but one factor. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of understanding the systemic factors that contribute to forced migration, including political instability, economic inequality, environmental displacement, and persecution. Through advocacy, education, and charitable works, Catholic faithful can work to create a world where individuals and families are free to choose whether to migrate or stay in their homelands—to live in safety and dignity regardless of where they call home.

## The Root Causes of Migration

Pope Leo XIII observed in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 that most people are predisposed to remain where things are familiar if given the opportunity to do so. The familiarity of local customs and language



provides a sense of belonging and identity that can be difficult to replicate elsewhere. It is difficult to pick up and emigrate to a country where the language is different, access to gainful employment is hard to come by, and social mores are unfamiliar.

But we live in a world where the choice to remain is not always a realistic one. To understand global migration, it is thus important to understand the root causes that motivate people to migrate, often against their own desires. Pope Francis, in his message for the 109<sup>th</sup> WDMR on September 24, recalls that "migrants flee because of poverty, fear or desperation" and points out that some of the most visible causes of migration are "persecutions, wars, atmospheric phenomena and dire poverty."

### *Persecution, Violence, and War*

Persecution and discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, political beliefs, or membership status in a particular social group will prompt people to move large distances in search of living conditions

where safety can reign over their lives. War and internal strife such as widespread organized national criminal activity can pose danger to individuals and families and prompt migration. For example, the turbulent Northern Triangle of Central America, composed of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, was described in 2018 by the U.S. Department of State as a



region that “suffers from high rates of violence and crime with weak judicial systems to prosecute criminals and protect those affected.” Countless thousands of people have left a multitude of war-torn or unsafe countries, some of whom receive little coverage in international news, seeking safety and security in other regions of the world.

### *Economics and Related Social Factors*

In economic migration people generally move from poorer developing areas into richer areas where wages are higher and more jobs are available. Immigration from Brazil in the last decade of the 20th century provides an example of the way in which economic factors contributed to migration patterns. Many Brazilians sought to escape the hyperinflation that plagued Brazil up until 1994. Yet even after inflation subsided and prices stabilized, the purchasing power of middle- and lower-class Brazilians continued to drop, resulting in a wave of migration to the United States in search of wages several times higher than what they earned in Brazil working the same jobs. Declining or stagnant wealth, paired with the promise of economic prosperity elsewhere, can function as a significant impetus to migrate.

Social factors motivating migration include the search for better opportunities for oneself or one’s family, including better education, employment benefits, and career growth prospects. United States college and graduate programs have been a particularly strong attraction for young, talented individuals around the world.

### *Environmental Displacement*

Environmental factors such as hurricanes, crop failure, pollution, and climate change may result in immediate or long-term health risks, loss of shelter, and lack of viable food sources locally. In *Laudato si’* (2015), Pope Francis highlighted the rise in migrants fleeing environmental degradation and called for collective global action on the crisis. Hurricanes Eta and Iota rampaged through Central America several years later, resulting in the displacement of an estimated 1.5 million people.

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A consistent consideration across these root causes of migration is family unity. Representatives of the international Catholic church and U.S. Catholic bishops have spoken clearly about the need to maintain family units in immigration agreements and national legislation. For Catholics, it is necessary to incorporate the principles and values of Catholic social teaching equally within the context of the root causes of migration: human life and dignity, the common good, a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, the dignity of work, solidarity, subsidiarity, integral human development, and welcoming the stranger.

In his message this year, the Holy Father asks us “to see in the migrant not simply a brother or sister in difficulty, but Christ himself, who knocks at our door” and adds that, “as we work to ensure that in every case migration is the fruit of a free decision, we are called to show maximum respect for the dignity of each migrant.”



Wrote Pope Francis: “In whatever place we decide to build our future, in the country of our birth or elsewhere, the important thing is that there always be a community ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate everyone, without distinctions and without excluding anyone.”

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