News



Immigrants turn themselves in to Border Patrol agents April 2 after crossing the border from Mexico into the U.S., and wait to be transported to processing center near McAllen, Texas. (CNS/Loren Elliott, Reuters)



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From Denver to New York City, the country's Catholic bishops have joined a chorus of organizations, institutions and high-profile individuals urging the Trump administration to stop separating children from their parents as they seek respite in the U.S. from dire conditions in their home countries, largely in Central America.

None have been more outspoken, however, than the bishops with dioceses on or near the border between the U.S. and Mexico, where many migrants, adults as well as children, are being held in detention centers in geographic areas where many of the prelates come into contact with families affected.

"Refugee children belong to their parents, not to the government or other institution. To steal children from their parents is a grave sin, immoral (and) evil," said San Antonio's Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller June 14 via Twitter, the social media platform he has used to daily call attention to the situation.

"Their lives have already been extremely difficult. Why do we (the U.S.) torture them even more, treating them as criminals?" he continued.

In a June 5 interview with CBS News, U.S Attorney General Jeff Sessions said: "If people don't want to be separated from their children, they should not bring them with them," meaning they shouldn't bring them along when trying to cross the border, which many do as they seek asylum. The furor over the separation of children from a parent or parents had already started in late May, before Sessions used a Bible passage to justify the actions.

Bishop Daniel Flores of the Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, said via Twitter May 31 that "separating immigrant parents and children as a supposed deterrent to

immigration is a cruel and reprehensible policy. Children are not instruments of deterrence, they are children. A government that thinks any means is suitable to achieve an end cannot secure justice for anyone."

But the outrage began in earnest after the June 14 speech to law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, when Sessions said the practice of separating families is consistent with the teachings of the Bible because "persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order."

The following day, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan said during CNN's "Cuomo Prime Time with Chris Cuomo" that while he appreciated Sessions quoting the Bible, the quote he used was not the best.

"For one, St. Paul always says we should obey the law of the government if that law is in conformity with the Lord's law, all right? No pun intended but God's law trumps man's law, all right?" he said.

"And St. Paul himself who gave the quote that the attorney general used, he wouldn't obey Roman law when it said it was mandatory to worship the emperor," the cardinal continued. "He wouldn't obey that law. I don't think we should obey a law that goes against what God intends that you would take a baby, a child, from their mom. I mean, that's just unjust. That's unbiblical. That's un-American. There could be no Bible passage that would justify that."

After Sessions' Bible quote, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, also used the Bible to make a point and compared Christ's time as a refugee in the Holy Land to the migrants.

In a June 15 statement, he compared the distance from his diocese to other localities in Guatemala and Mexico, saying that "if Jesus of Nazareth returned, as at that time, from Galilee to Judea, ... we dare say he would not get as far as Sacred Heart Church downtown (in El Paso) before being detained."

He urged Christians to think about the families fleeing and seeking asylum in the U.S., what they're going through and said that what's at stake "is the fundamental question of being Christian today, of being a person of faith today in our country and on the continent that is suffering an hour of Christ's passion."

Seitz announced a public prayerful procession "in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who continue to migrate to our border" planned for the evening of July 20 in El Paso but did not release other details. The U.S. bishops also are talking about the possibility of a delegation of prelates going to the detention centers where many children are being held.

In mid-June, The Associated Press said this year "nearly 2,000 children have been separated from their families at the U.S. border over a six-week period during a crackdown on illegal entries," according to documents from the Department of Homeland Security, which operates Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Family separation policies "tear at our core values as a nation," Bishop Oscar Solis of Salt Lake City said. "We are, and must continue to be, a beacon of hope for families unable to find basic protections and pathways out of poverty within their home countries."

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The U.S. "has a right to protect its borders," but also has "a moral obligation to do so through means that preserve families and the dignity and sanctity of all life," he added. For decades, he noted, "the U.S. bishops have advocated for sensible reforms to our long-broken immigration system."

"Refusing asylum to women escaping from domestic violence and separating children from their parents is an unnecessary and aggressive act against human life, and unfathomable from a country with a heart as strong as ours," Solis said in a June 18 statement.

Said Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon: "Whatever one thinks about the most prudent way to resolve our mounting immigration problems, mercy and charity dictate that we do not potentially cause irreparable harm and trauma when there is another way."

The government has discretion to keep families together in "its implementation of federal immigration law," he said.

"We need to see the real human faces of those affected," Sample said. "These are families not unlike our own. In the ongoing debate over immigration issues, the U.S.

bishops have always maintained, as a fundamental principle, that families must be kept together."

"St. Thomas Aquinas said that when a human law does not reflect God's law then it becomes an unjust law and even an act of violence," Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez wrote in a June 19 column in Angelus, the archdiocesan news website.

"We need to insist that those who make and enforce our laws guard against this," he said, adding, "That means stop the family separations right now -- and give those 2,000 children back to their moms and dads."

He, too, said the nation's leaders "have a solemn duty to secure our national borders and enforce our immigration laws. No one questions this. But we must find a better way."

Two prelates from Colorado, Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila and Denver Auxiliary Bishop Jorge Rodriguez, repeated what other bishops have said in June 18 statement, saying that while borders must be protected, the policy of separating families is "immoral" and urged that it be terminated immediately, saying those being detained are in need of protection.

"These children and their parents are often fleeing violence and our country should not add to the inhumanity of their situation," they said.

This story appears in the **Families Separated at the Border** feature series. View the full series.