News

Migrants from Central America seeking asylum in the U.S. are pictured through a fence in Nue

Migrants from Central America seeking asylum in the U.S. are pictured through a fence in Nuevo Teapa, Mexico, Jan. 21, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Tamara Corro)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Five U.S. border bishops, along with a number of leading migration activists and advocates, have sent a letter to President Joe Biden outlining a plan for border reform, modeled after Pope Francis' call for policies "to welcome, promote, protect, and integrate those who come in search of better lives for themselves and their families."

The two-page letter and its accompanying framework for reform calls for restoring asylum at the border, pursuing policies that promote the protection of those on the move rather than deterrence measures, and a new comprehensive immigration policy that provides a pathway to citizenship for the millions of undocumented individuals forced to live in the shadows.

The letter was sent on Jan. 28 and was signed by Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico; Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas; Bishop Edward Weisenburger of Tucson, Arizona; Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego; Bishop Ricardo Ramírez of

Las Cruces, New Mexico; Jesuit Fr. Sean Carroll of the Kino Border Initiative; Dylan Corbett of Hope Border Institute; Kenneth Ferrone of Catholic Charities of Southern New Mexico; Missionary of Jesus Sr. Norma Pimentel of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande; and Melissa Lopez of Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services in El Paso. In addition to the individual signatories, the letter received the institutional backing of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Border Ministers and Immigrant Advocates, Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach, and Jesuit Refugee Service/USA.

The letter is set against the backdrop of the Jan. 6 violent insurrection in the nation's capital, with the signatories writing that "a divisive politics has long proceeded unchecked, unmoored from love of neighbor, and enabled by the silence of those who had responsibility to speak."

"In our work on the border, we have seen the same steady drying up of mutual concern, the disappearance of compassion and the troubling growth of the spirit of indifference for decades," they write.

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Among the specific policy proposals is a call to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to asylum-seekers forced to remain in Mexico until their cases are processed and a call to move away from "policies grounded in deterrence and military-style strategies and move towards a system grounded in the recognition of the rights and dignity of migrants and asylum seekers."

They also call for new measures to end human trafficking and for the administration to address the root causes of Central American flight by "promoting safe communities, genuine democracy and sustainable development efforts in Central America, through close consultation with human rights and civic organizations in the region."

The letter to Biden comes just one week after the president unveiled new legislation that includes an eight-year pathway to citizenship for the nearly 11 million immigrants living in the country without legal documentation and just two days after a federal judge blocked Biden's 100-day deportation pause.

"We are inspired by your leadership in denouncing white supremacy and extremism, and in underscoring the need for our nation to prioritize the common good. Your bold

proposals and action on immigration reform give us hope," the signatories wrote to the president.

"We know that the critical work of rebuilding must also begin at the border, where our national bonds of solidarity and the rule of law have both been distorted and undermined," they added. "Here we have seen how fear and anxiety can be quickened into deadly hatred of neighbor, into weapons of division and racism and into wall-building between family and friends."

During an NCR panel discussion on Jan. 21, Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia reflected on immigration reform in light of Francis' prioritization of the issue.

Francis, said Kaine, "is criticizing indifference and bystanding as the disease of the day." By enacting new immigration reform, he said, legislators would be "honoring what Pope Francis has called us to do."

In concluding their letter, the bishops and migration leaders pledged to find ways to work with the new administration to make migration reform a reality, echoing a statement from the U.S. bishops' conference applauding the Biden administration's plans to pursue comprehensive immigration reform.

"Together, with the most vulnerable," they wrote, "let us reimagine our common future in the United States, on the US-Mexico border and with our neighbors in Latin America."