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Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima, Wash., delivers a heartfelt speech about migration and care for creation at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington Jan. 27, 2025. (OSV News/courtesy USCCB Secretariat of Justice and Peace)



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Yakima, Washington — January 29, 2025
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For those to whom America's escalating immigration crisis feels perhaps comfortably remote or abstract, Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of Yakima, Washington, knows the gritty realities of the people he shepherds.

The bishop's own diocese is located in central Washington, one of the world's leading sources of apples and other produce, largely harvested through migrant labor. Yakima County itself has an estimated 24,000 unauthorized immigrants. During harvest, the region may have 100,000 migrant farmworkers, many on agricultural visas.

On Jan. 27, Tyson offered a plenary policy session titled "Pope Francis' Vision for Ecology, Dialogue, and the Common Good" to hundreds of attendees at the 2025 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington. He focused on those the pope has described as society's "discarded" — migrants, refugees and the poor — and shared the stark truths of their lives.

"Several years back," Tyson told listeners, "a mom who worked on the apple sorting line in one of our many fruit packing plants took a leave to go home to a village in Michoacán, Mexico, to deal with her own very sick mother. While caring for her mother, she herself was kidnapped."

"The kidnappers sent the family a ransom note, which made it back to the Yakima Valley," Tyson continued. "They wanted $15,000. A collection basket was sent around the fruit packing plant. Between the family and her co-workers, they raised about $7,000 and sent the money to the kidnappers."

"A few days later, a note arrived to the family in the village, stapled to a trash bag," he said. "The kidnappers acknowledged receipt of half the money. When the other half of the money came, they would send a second trash bag — with the other half of this dead mom's body."

"The family in the Yakima Valley," Tyson concluded in an even voice, "had memorial Masses celebrated."

The gruesome narrative painfully underlined two realities: The people Tyson serves lead very hard and even dangerous lives, and their decisions to leave the violent instability of their homelands are not made lightly.

Organized by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops with 20 national Catholic organizations, the Jan. 25-28 CSMG coincided with an avalanche of executive orders targeting immigration from the week-old Trump administration.

Tyson frequently has referred to the Yakima Diocese as the largest border diocese without a border. "About three-fourths of our parishioners have roots in Mexico," he remarked, "and the vast majority of people in the Diocese of Yakima attend Mass in Spanish."

Framing his remarks with Romans 8:18-27 — "Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ..." — Tyson commented, "It is important to note here that the very concepts of redemption and salvation come from the ancient trade of human trafficking. Paul applies this common understanding at that time to all of creation, not just to human life."

Creation — in Pope Francis' teaching and in the Catholic understanding — is a rich thematic source. The pope's landmark encyclicals "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home" (2015) and "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship" (2020) — are infused with illustrations of humanity's relationship to the world, and to God.

"One of the key concepts from Laudato Si' is 'integral human ecology,'" explained Tyson. "We humans are not the totality of creation."

He said, "When creation is respected with dignity, human dignity is enhanced. And when creation is denigrated, so too are humans degraded."

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"I see this most clearly in my own diocese," he added. "Those who work in orchards and fields depend on good treatment of the environment for their health and safety. Redemption is not simply about the redemption of humans, but all creation. God wants humans and all of creation set free."

Extending the illustration, Tyson declared, "Redemption by God is not an escape hatch but a rescue plan. We cannot just live our lives in a singular, merely personal relationship with God."

"Our redemption," he emphasized, "is dependent on how we live our lives integrally."

Slavery, Tyson continued, still infects contemporary society. One of his own seminarians — a Guatemalan named Nico — is an example.

"Nico was kidnapped for money, and held for ransom. He was beaten and tortured. His parents borrowed $50,000 from family and friends to free him," Tyson shared. "But the threat of kidnapping continued. One of the kidnappers was also a 'coyote.' So, in order to protect their son Nico, his parents paid a 'coyote' to get him to the United States. He ended up in the Diocese of Yakima, in the town of Mattawa."

Nico first worked as a busboy and then a waiter to pay back the money his parents borrowed to free him. After a profound retreat experience, he began to consider the priesthood. Tyson encouraged him to complete his high school diploma, and the diocesan attorney advised Nico had a strong case for asylum.

"At our Diocese of Yakima pastoral center Christmas retreat, Nico shared his story with us," Tyson said. "In his bones, he grasps that we can't save ourselves. We can't pay our own ransom. Someone else must do it for us. He told us this is how Christ saves us. He now understands 'salvation' more than most, and thus will make a very fine priest."

"Modern-day slavery takes many forms," he added. "But at the root is a profound disconnection or a willful disregard for paying attention to and cultivating the three key relationships Pope Francis noted in Laudato Si': with creation, with one another and with God."

To build solidarity with those they will serve, Tyson explained he requires his seminarians to labor in Yakima's produce fields.

"If my men are to elevate the bread and wine, gifts of the earth and the work of human hands," he reasoned, "then I want them to know the sweat and hard human labor behind those ecological gifts."

Patiently encountering those with different ideas can also assist in the work of connections and redemption, said Tyson.

One way to do so, he suggested, is to ask questions "about how others came to their emotionally anchored and deeply seated beliefs and opinions."

"All these things are connected," he said. "And the work of redemption and the idea of integral human development demand that we see the connections."

Tyson then made an impassioned plea of interconnectedness.

"Can we not perceive that so many who migrate here do so in order that they and their children can have a better, more secure life? Can we not grasp the connection between environmental concerns and their rural agricultural labor? Can we not see that the flow of drugs from the south are related to the flow of arms from the United States into the hands of the cartels in Mexico?" he asked.

"Can we not see that the migration from Mexico has multiple causes that include fleeing violence in rural areas? Can we not see that the flow of drugs is related to people in our neighborhoods who struggle with addictions?" asked Tyson. "Can we focus not only on the question of why we are flooded with opioids, but why are the people we serve turning towards drugs. Why are we here in the north so addicted?"

"Such questions take us on a pilgrimage of accompaniment, and challenge us to see God in all people and all creation," he concluded.

And although spiritual and societal challenges may sometimes threaten to overwhelm, there is, Tyson added, a prevailing truth of which to always be mindful.

"There is not one inch of creation that escapes the salvific power of Christ's horrific and tortuous death on a cross," he proclaimed. "If our hearts are open!"