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U.S. President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance and second

U.S. President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, Vice President JD Vance and second lady Usha Vance attend the national prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral Jan. 21, 2025, the day after Trump was sworn in for his second term as the 47th president of the United States. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



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Editor's note: *This story was updated at 10 a.m. Central time, Feb. 11, with a statement from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.*

Pope Francis has written a sweeping letter to the U.S. bishops decrying the "major crisis" triggered by President Donald Trump's mass deportation plans and explicitly rejecting Vice President JD Vance's attempts to use Catholic theology to justify the administration's immigration crackdown.

"The act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of

the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness," reads the pope's Feb. 11 letter.

Since taking office on Jan. 20, the Republican president has taken more than 20 executive actions aimed at overhauling the U.S. immigration system, including plans to ratchet up the deportations of undocumented migrants and halt the processing of asylum seekers.

The pope's letter, published by the Vatican in both English and Spanish, offered his solidarity with U.S. bishops who are engaged in migration advocacy and draws a parallel between Jesus' own experience as a migrant and the current geopolitical situation.

"Jesus Christ … did not live apart from the difficult experience of being expelled from his own land because of an imminent risk to his life, and from the experience of having to take refuge in a society and a culture foreign to his own," writes Francis.

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While the letter acknowledges the right of every country to enact necessary policies to defend itself and promote public safety, the pope said that all laws must be enacted "in the light of the dignity of the person and his or her fundamental rights, not vice versa."

The pontiff also goes on to clearly reject efforts to characterize the migrants as criminals, a frequent rhetorical device used by Trump administration officials.

"The rightly formed conscience cannot fail to make a critical judgment and express its disagreement with any measure that tacitly or explicitly identifies the illegal status of some migrants with criminality," the pope writes.

Soon after Trump took office, Vice President JD Vance — a recent convert to Roman Catholicism — attempted to defend the administration's migration crackdown by appealing to St. Thomas Aquinas' concept of *ordo amoris*.

"Just google 'ordo amoris,' " Vance posted on social media on Jan. 30 in response to criticism he received following a Fox News interview.

During that interview, Vance said: "You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world."

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While not mentioning Vance directly by name, Francis used his Feb. 11 letter to directly reject that interpretation of Catholic theology.

"The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan,' that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception," wrote the pope.

Since his election in 2013, Francis has become one of the world's most vocal champions of migrants. His latest letter, however, marks a rare moment when the pontiff has directly waded into a country's policy debates.

In the letter, however, he states that this is a "decisive moment in history" that requires reaffirming "not only our faith in a God who is always close, incarnate, migrant and refugee, but also the infinite and transcendent dignity of every human person."

"What is built on the basis of force, and not on the truth about the equal dignity of every human being, begins badly and will end badly," the pope warned.

In a brief post on social media, the U.S. bishops' conference shared the pope's letter with its online followers.

"We are grateful for the support, moral encouragement, and prayers of the Holy Father, to the Bishops in affirmation of their work upholding the God-given dignity of the human person," read the statement.

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