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Representatives of Catholic and immigration advocacy organizations, and Washington's new Cardinal Robert McElroy, grappled with the need to send a clear moral message on the dignity of migrants amid the "uncertainty" of the political moment at a recent event in the nation's capital.

Participants at a March 24 conference organized by Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and the Center for Migration Studies of New York considered challenges and opportunities in migration policy from the perspective of Catholic social teaching. They addressed disruptions to funding for projects done in partnership with the federal government and skepticism about the church's work in this area, including from some Trump administration officials.

McElroy, who was installed as archbishop of Washington earlier in March, took particular aim in his comments at some officials' calls for mass deportations and the termination of the U.S. Agency for International Development. USAID, the government's now-shuttered humanitarian aid agency, operated in countries all over the globe and provided some funding for efforts by Catholic and other faith-based humanitarian groups.



Then-San Diego Bishop Robert W. McElroy is pictured in a file photo speaking with Mexican Archbishop Francisco Moreno Barron of Tijuana through the border fence in San Diego. Now-Washington Cardinal McElroy, and Cardinal Fabio Baggio of Bassano del Grappa, Italy, the undersecretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, spoke March 24, 2025, at a virtual conference organized by Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and the Center for Migration Studies of New York. (OSV News/David Maung)

"I think we must say to ourselves quite clearly and categorically: The suspension of Agency for International Development monies for humanitarian relief is moral theft for the poorest and most desperate men, women and children in our world today," McElroy said. "It is unconscionable through any prism of Catholic thought. And thus, we who are in the work of helping migrants and refugees, in this case, are merely in the work of helping humanity as it exists in suffering, to understand that giving less than 1% of our government's budget to assist the most desperate humanitarian needs of the world is our obligation as people of faith and as a nation."

"Eliminating our government's meager but so crucial assistance to those who are in need for clinics, health, vaccines, and food services throughout the world," he said, is "utterly contrary" to "our life as disciples of Jesus Christ."

McElroy issued a sharp rebuke of mass deportations, while adding that humane efforts to reduce irregular migration would be in line with Catholic teaching.

"In this moment in which mass deportation is the national goal of our government, every undocumented person," as well as their families, he added, "lives in fear, and it is purposeful, it is a fear meant to generate deportation."

But McElroy also said, "There are many people who oppose immigration on the very position that they think our borders should be secure." He said that can be in line with Catholic teaching.

Catholic social teaching on immigration balances three interrelated principles — the right of persons to migrate in order to sustain their lives and those of their families, the right of a country to regulate its borders and control immigration, and a nation's duty to regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

"Many people who are seeking stronger security at the border do so out of a sense that stronger security at the border, that is a legitimate goal, and the exclusion of those who are truly guilty of serious crimes who are undocumented, is also a legitimate goal," he said. "We must understand that in our discussion, we can't lump everyone together. But we must always also understand that many themes that are supporting the effort to undermine the rights, the human dignity of the undocumented, come from the blackest hearts of our history."

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On immigration, McElroy said the United States faces "two different pathways."

"The first pathway, which Catholic social teaching would support, is to change our laws so that they have secure borders and dignity for the treatment of everyone at those borders and a generous asylum and refugee policy, that is one pathway we as a nation can come to order," McElroy said.

The cardinal said he believed most Americans would favor that pathway.

"The other pathway is a crusade, which comes from the darkest parts of our American psyche and soul and history. The crusade denigrates the undocumented. It labels them as defective, castigates them and captures them and encapsulates them as criminals," he said. "It refuses to see the human being that is there and the good that they have already accomplished in the society which they have been living for so many years."

He said, "These are the two choices we have."

Some speakers at the conference addressed ongoing litigation over the government's termination of a contract with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' refugee resettlement program as part of its broader effort to enforce its hardline immigration policies. Others addressed Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's attempt to shut down El Paso's Annunciation House, a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants as among other challenges.

Cardinal Fabio Baggio of Bassano del Grappa, Italy, the undersecretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, addressed the conference virtually hours before his participation in a March 24 rally, march and prayer vigil in solidarity with migrants in El Paso, Texas. Baggio said that a lack of regard for the dignity of migrants is part of what Pope Francis has described as the "throwaway culture" that is also behind disregard for the unborn and the elderly.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.