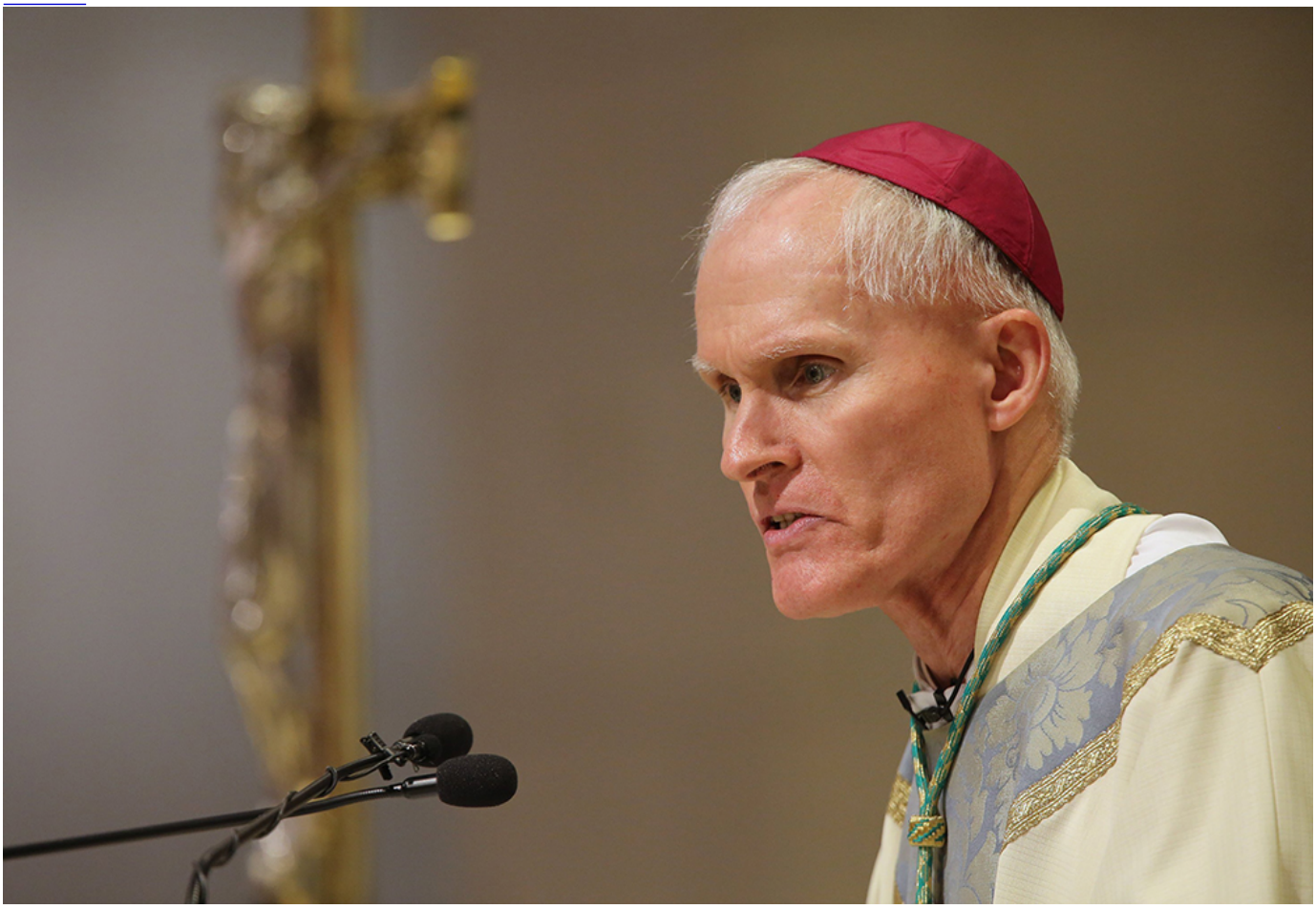
News



Bishop Mark E. Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, is pictured in a 2019 photo at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Wheeling. Brennan issued a statement July 31, 2025, addressing the immigration crisis and calling people in his state to "pray for the courage to do the right thing." (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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Amid the Trump administration's crackdown on illegal immigration, Bishop Mark E. Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, is urging the people of his state to "affirm the humanity of all immigrants, regardless of legal status." But he also called on every person to "pray for the courage to do the right thing," including those tasked with carrying out the nation's laws, warning that God will judge each person by their actions.

The bishop released a July 31 "Statement on the Current Immigration Crisis," which was posted to the diocese's Facebook page.

The three-page document comes as the Department of Homeland Security works to fulfill President Donald Trump's mass deportation campaign promise, with immigration enforcement actions including violent takedowns, increased arrest quotas, third-country deportations and the construction of more migrant detention facilities modeled on the controversial Alligator Alcatraz facility set up in the inhospitable terrain of the Florida Everglades.

"We are a nation built on the backs of men and women who came from other countries, whether freely or in chains," Brennan said in his statement. "Now we see our government adopting harsh measures to deport as many immigrants as possible, often without distinguishing between true criminals and law-abiding persons."

The bishop noted that some had told him they supported efforts to "install order at the southern border" while preventing violent offenders from entering the nation. But he also said they told him that they "didn't expect this wholesale assault on the majority of immigrants, who work hard, are raising their families and live peacefully in our communities."



Agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detain a man after conducting a raid at the Cedar Run apartment complex in Denver on Feb. 5, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)

"You expected a laser beam approach, not a floodlight," said Brennan.

Brennan said the Catholic faith sheds light on the current immigration crisis. He referenced how the Gospels attest that Mary and Joseph had to flee Israel, their homeland, for Roman-ruled Egypt in order to save Jesus, the newborn savior and son of God, from falling into the murderous hands of King Herod the Great. The bishop also noted Jesus' own words in Matthew 25 to those he invites to join him in paradise at the Last Judgment: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

"Our Church looks at the person, not his or her legal status, and, following Christ's teaching and example, reaches out to help the immigrant," Brennan continued. "A person is more important than legal status."

He noted that "even prisoners in jail are fed, clothed and have their health problems addressed, at least in well-run prisons." The bishop emphasized that the diocese "will continue to advocate for and assist our immigrant brothers and sisters in our parishes and through Catholic Charities."

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.

Brennan said that entering the U.S. without legal permission is typically a misdemeanor — "a crime but a lesser one, on the level with loitering, public intoxication and shoplifting" — that only becomes a felony following deportation and unauthorized re-entry.

The bishop indicated the government's treatment toward migrants is incoherent. He noted it is expelling "millions of workers upon whom the economy depends," while breaking up families of immigrants who typically marry younger and have more children than the average American couple, at the very moment the U.S. fertility rate has plunged below population replacement levels.

He noted his own state is already suffering this population decline. West Virginia is one of 17 states, according to U.S. census data, where deaths now outnumber births.

"The main problem is that our immigration laws discourage legal immigration," he said, unless a prospective immigrant is a "celebrity or a person with a special skill our government wants."

He pointed to the yearslong wait experienced by immigrants as they navigate "the complicated and expensive immigration process," often stymied by U.S. immigration quotas that favor some nations over others.

"Some people simply cannot wait for the legal immigration process to slowly and painfully unfold," said Brennan. "They could be killed for their religion or political views or see their children starve to death before they are granted a visa to come here legally; so, they come anyway because they are desperate."

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According to the U.N. Refugee Agency, by the end of 2024 more than 123 million people worldwide — one in every 67 persons on Earth — had been forced to flee their homes due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and instability.

According to Pew Research Center, an estimated 11 million migrants were living and working in the U.S. without legal authorization in 2022, the year with the most recent available data, a figure still below the peak of 12.2 million from 2007.

Brennan said that both of the two U.S. major political parties "have avoided dealing seriously with immigration reform," and "have benefited by keeping immigration a live issue in their campaigns."

"Our politicians have failed us," said Brennan.

Yet, he said, referencing the biblical story of Cain and Abel, "We are our brother's and sister's keepers."

But he also said people must act on Christian principles, particularly in light of Jesus Christ's commands in the Gospels to "love your neighbor as yourself" and "do under others as you would have them do unto you."

To that end, he stressed the importance of prayer, outreach and action in upholding the dignity of immigrants, especially speaking up to counter "grossly inaccurate talk about undocumented immigrants being uniformly criminal." He also recommended contacting public officials to urge "immigration enforcement to be less cruel and more focused on violent criminals."

But Brennan also exhorted the faithful to "remember our history," including the refusal of many to comply with the nation's Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The federal law required local law enforcement to arrest African Americans who had escaped slavery while forbidding U.S. citizens, on pain of ruinous fines (equivalent to $41,000 today) and six months imprisonment, to assist such individuals.

"It is Catholic teaching that an unjust law does not bind in conscience," said the bishop. "But one must be willing to accept the consequences of civil disobedience. ... We must pray for the courage to do the right thing."

The bishop then said, "I encourage even those whose official duty is to enforce the current administration's immigration policies to consider whether a specific action is morally justified.

"I recognize that they have sworn to uphold the law. Yet the manner in which a law is enforced matters," Brennan said. "Those acting on the government's behalf cannot escape personal responsibility for an unjust action with the excuse that it was ordered by their superiors. That defense was not allowed during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals at the end of World War II."

Brennan made clear that "what has been reported about excesses in immigration enforcement does not approach the horror of Nazi treatment of prisoners." Nevertheless, he emphasized, "the principle of personal responsibility for one's actions remains the same."

He acknowledged that "challenging a superior's unjust or cruel order risks retaliation, so the degree of injustice a government agent perceives in such an order must be weighed against the potential for severe repercussions against the agent."

"Still," he said, "we should all keep in mind that the final judge of our actions is God. Our Church would have no martyrs if the highest good was to preserve one's life. Some things are worth taking a principled stand for."

Brennan asked, "How would God judge actions that pull a man away from his wife and children in order to deport him? How would He judge arresting a person just because 'he looks like an immigrant?' How does He look at a large, rich nation that turns away the world's poor and suffering?"

According to the church's teaching in Catechism of the Catholic Church, "The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin."

"Our government's own inaction is the main reason why many oppressed and struggling people feel obliged to enter our country without legal documents," said Brennan. "Now our government is overreacting by trying to force them out. We Catholics must welcome the stranger and feed and clothe him."