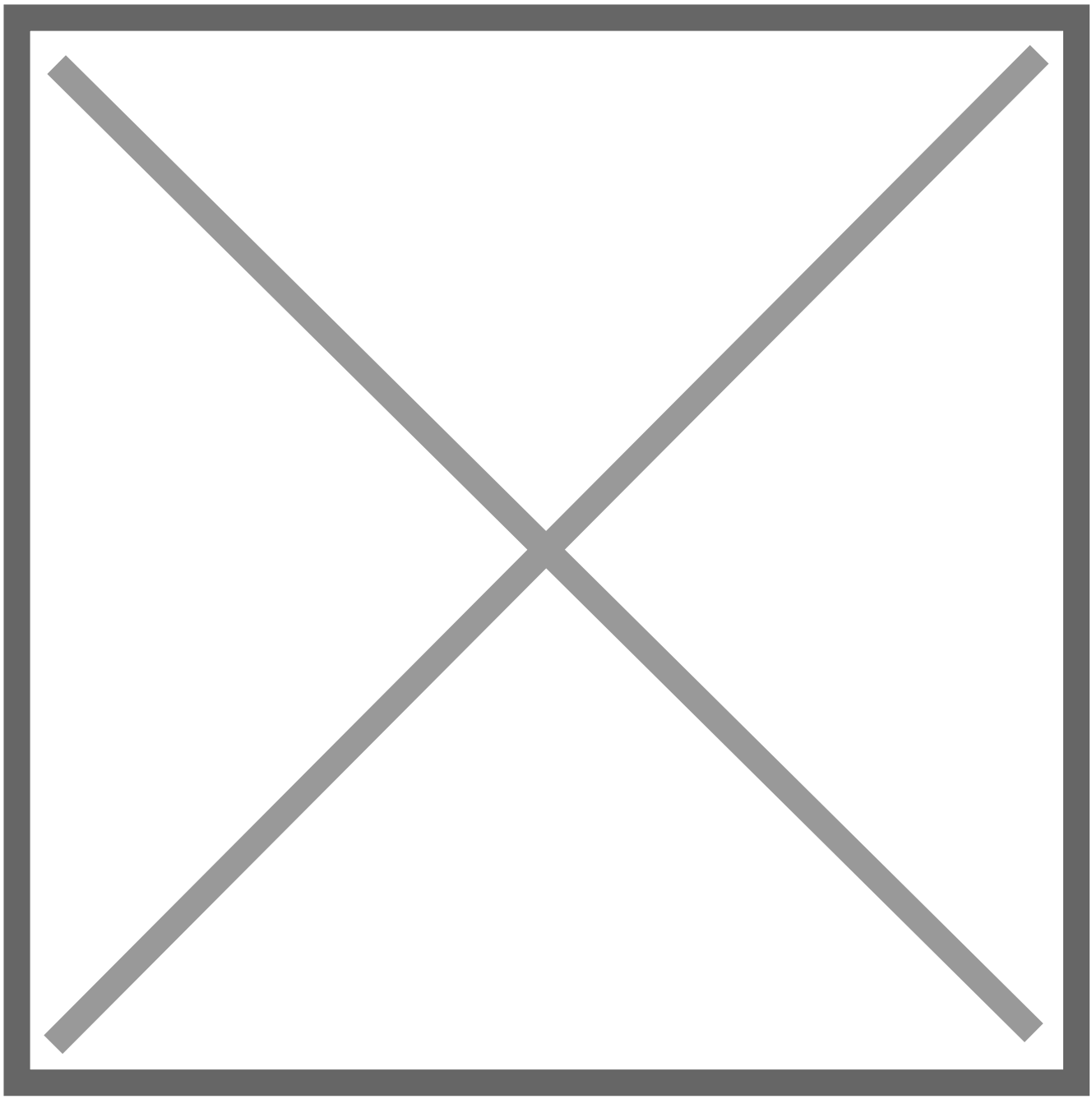
News



Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., speaks at Holy Cross College in South Bend, Ind., on Feb. 18, for the college’s Spring 2026 Mind and Heart Lecture. Rhoades delivered the lecture, titled "Addressing the Plight of Migrants and Refugees with the Mind and Heart of Christ," offering a theological reflection on what he called "a crisis of immense proportions." (OSV News/Courtesy of Holy Cross College)

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Bishop Kevin Rhoades of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, and the secretary for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, delivered a lecture at Holy Cross College on what he described as a "crisis of immense proportions."

"The topic I have been asked to speak about concerns one of the greatest challenges our world faces today: the migrant and refugee crisis," Rhoades began telling the large crowd of students, faculty, staff, and community members that had gathered in the college's St. Joseph's Chapel Feb. 18 for its twice annual Mind and Heart Lecture.

Drawing on the most recent United Nations data, Rhoades underscored the staggering scope of global displacement.

"This past June, the most recent reporting period, the U.N. reported that there are 117.3 million displaced people in the world, of whom 42.5 million are refugees; 67.8 million are displaced within their own countries; and 8.42 million are asylum seekers," he said.

"Refugees are people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country," Rhoades explained. "There are various reasons they are forced to flee: to escape war, conflict, violence, persecution, or serious public disorder." Many, he

added, flee out of "a well-founded fear of harm."

Even as he presented these statistics, Rhoades cautioned against focusing solely on numbers.

"These are real people," he said. "Over 40% of refugees today are children under the age of 18. Over 60% of refugees are in family units."

Rhoades described the trauma many endure, including dangerous journeys, overcrowded refugee camps, lack of clean water and adequate shelter, and years of uncertainty.

"As Christians, we must never treat the suffering of others as if it does not concern us," he said.

"We must look at this issue first and foremost from the perspective of God's revelation transmitted to us in Scripture and Tradition, and not from the perspective of one's political party or narrow ideologies," Rhoades said.

Migration, he reminded the audience, is a major theme in Scripture. He pointed to the Exodus, when Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and to God's command in Exodus 22:20: "You shall not oppress an alien; you know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt."

He also cited Leviticus 19:34: "You shall treat the stranger who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you. Have the same love for him as for yourself."

In the New Testament, he highlighted the flight of the Holy Family which Pope Pius XII in *Exsul Familia Nazarethena* called "the archetype of every refugee family." The Gospel of Matthew describes how Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who were the lawful subjects of King Herod the Great, had to flee the Kingdom of Judea shortly after Jesus' birth, and cross into the borders of Roman-ruled Egypt beyond the reach of Herod who was seeking to kill Jesus.

Rhoades invoked the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis, recalling Cain's response to God after murdering his brother: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The bishop suggested that this question continues to resonate in modern debates about migrants.

"Perhaps the most direct instruction for us comes from the words of Jesus in the parable of the Last Judgment: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me,'" he said, referring to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25. "In welcoming the immigrant ... we are welcoming Jesus."

He added, "There is no doubt from the teaching of Scripture that we have a Christian responsibility to 'welcome the stranger among us.'"

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Shifting to Catholic social teaching, Rhoades explained the principle of the "universal destination of goods," which teaches that the goods of the earth are intended for all.

"We are stewards of the goods of the earth, not absolute masters," he said, "and are morally obliged to ensure that our goods benefit those in need, including migrants and refugees."

He also highlighted the Church's preferential option for the poor.

"As disciples of Jesus, we cannot be indifferent to the poor, to migrants and refugees, or to anyone living in misery," he said. "Human misery elicited the compassion of Christ and needs to elicit our compassion."

The second half of the lecture focused on what Rhoades called a "fundamental and natural right that is too often overlooked": the right not to migrate.

"The Church teaches that people have a right to find safety, economic opportunity and dignity in their own homeland," he said.

The bishop discussed the work of Catholic Relief Services, the overseas charitable arm of the Catholic Church in the U.S., on whose board he has served. CRS operates in more than 100 countries, providing emergency relief and development so families can remain in their homelands.

However, he noted, severe cuts to USAID funding last year eliminated nearly 50% of the CRS budget, forcing staff layoffs and reducing many life-saving programs.

"This has jeopardized food security, health services and other humanitarian help for millions of poor people," he said. Despite these challenges, he encouraged the

audience to support CRS through increased private giving, particularly during Lent.

Turning to the right to migrate, the bishop affirmed that when a person's life and dignity are threatened, "one has the right to migrate elsewhere where they can live humanly."

"We have a moral responsibility to recognize, uphold, and defend this right," including the right of asylum, Rhoades said. At the same time, he acknowledged that "the right to migrate is not an absolute right."

"The Church recognizes the right of nations to control entry of migrants and to protect their borders," he said, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, where the Church teaches that prosperous nations are obliged, "to the extent they are able," to welcome the foreigner in search of security and livelihood.

He stressed the importance of safe and legal pathways, family reunification, and a humane asylum process.

"There are approximately 3.4 to 3.5 million asylum cases awaiting a hearing or final decision in the United States," he said, calling the backlog "a terrible one."

Throughout the lecture, Rhoades returned to the principle of solidarity, quoting St. John Paul II. The late pontiff described solidarity not as "a feeling of vague compassion," but as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."

"That includes our migrant brothers and sisters," Rhoades said. "To be indifferent to them," he concluded, "is to be indifferent to Jesus."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.