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To the Priests of the Diocese of Oakland

Dear brother priests:

"When I was a stranger, you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

When one part of the body suffers, all parts suffer with it.

The Church is the Body of Christ. So when one part of the Church suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. This is the case in our diocese today, with the prospect of children coming home from school and finding one or both of their parents missing because they have been deported.

I want to say up front that I, and all Catholic bishops in the USA, believe every nation has the right to establish and control its borders. We also believe that criminals: drug dealers, human traffickers, thieves, etc. should be arrested, prosecuted, and -- if need be -- deported. No one disputes this.

But just because someone is here in the U.S. without documents does not automatically make them a criminal. "But they've broken the law" you say. True. Someone who has received a speeding ticket has also broken the law. But we don't brand them criminals.

The number one issue all Catholic bishops and I favor is Comprehensive Immigration Reform. At present there is no reasonable way for many people to legally get visas to enter, or remain legally, in the USA. Ask the farmers who desperately need agricultural workers to harvest crops: they are begging the government for more guest worker visas. Even reasonable requests for short term visas are being denied. The overseas parents of one of our seminarians who is about to be ordained priest in May were denied a tourist visa to attend their son's Ordination and First Mass in Oakland, even after the diocese sent all requested notarized documentation to the State Department.

America is a country of immigrants. We are a Church of immigrants. Our Catholic Faith teaches that we should welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan. In the Book of Exodus it says: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien. For you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt." It also says: "You shall not oppress an alien. You well know how it feels to be an alien since you were once an alien yourself in the land of Egypt." That is one of the great things about the United States: so many people have come here, from so many countries, and together we form "The land of the free, and the home of the brave" as Pope Francis reminded us during his speech to the US Congress in 2015.

Even more, in the Catholic Church, all the baptized are not only equal "members", but are brothers and sisters in Christ. We had a large statue of the Blessed Mother in my high school, and at her feet were students from various races and nationalities. In the beautiful carving, Mary had extended the mantle of her cloak to cover them all. Are we trying to push people out of our communities, out

For the greater glory of God

from our Catholic parishes and schools, out from under Mary's mantle . . . because they don't have papers?

Here is what we are doing as a Church to follow God's express command to help.

1. Representatives of the US Bishops' Conference are meeting with leaders of our government in Washington to intercede for our immigrant community, asking that parents not be separated from each other or from their children.
2. Archbishop Cordileone and I are meeting in early April with the head of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) in the Bay Area to intercede for our own local communities.
3. I ask all pastors and principals of Catholic parishes and schools not to allow agents from ICE to enter our church and school properties without proper legal warrants. If needed please contact Cristina Hernández at the chancery for immediate assistance at chernandez@oakdiocese.org or by phone at 510-267-8379.
4. We will continue to provide services to those who seek assistance, such as food, shelter and legal aid, through our related organizations, such as Catholic Charities, regardless of the person's national origin, religion or immigration status. Contact Catholic Charities of the East Bay, and St. Vincent de Paul chapters for assistance.
5. The diocese is organizing Training Sessions and Workshops in every region and deanery so people may know their rights and protections under the law. I ask pastors to publicize these workshops to the greatest extent possible. There are many community and legal resources for our people that are just a phone call away. "Knowing your rights", and "What to do if ICE should come knocking", is one of the greatest assets to reduce the level of fear and anxiety in our people. You can access this information at www.oakdiocese.org/immigration.
6. The Diocese of Oakland supports the dignity of all persons without regard to immigration status. The Church asks the congress and president to pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform. Until that happens, the Church stands in solidarity with those who are currently living "in the shadows".

I realize people of good will may have differing opinions on immigration. But if you are a Christian and consider yourself a disciple of Christ, I ask you to please consider the situation from Christ's point of view. We do not demonize those with whom we disagree. We are Americans, yes. But Christians, first. Remember what happened when Joseph was commanded by the angel to get up in the middle of the night, take Mary and the Child, and flee to Egypt. Would you have deported them from Egypt, because they did not have papers? Deported them back into Herod's hands?

I take this opportunity to thank each one of you for your faithful ministry to all our brothers and sisters, especially those in the peripheries. May the Lord bless you and reward you.



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