



Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland

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“A Child is Never a Negotiating Tool”

**A Joint Statement from
Bishop Robert P. Deeley, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland and
Bishop Stephen T. Lane, Episcopal Bishop of Maine**

The following is an opinion editorial that will appear in the Bangor Daily News and other publications/platforms in the coming days.

June 19, 2018

“Every so often an issue emerges in public life that compels us, as faith leaders in Maine, to join together. The convergence of World Refugee Day and the current administration’s zero tolerance policy of separating families who present themselves as asylum seekers at the southern border inspires us to speak with one voice.

The family is the foundational element of our society and should be preserved whenever possible. To state the matter simply: tearing children from their parents is immoral. It does not reflect the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth whom we follow, nor the values upon which this nation was founded. Our faith calls upon us to respect the dignity of all persons as children made in the image of God. Our faith calls upon us to welcome the stranger. *“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God”* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Families that present themselves as a unit for consideration for asylum should be treated as a unit throughout the legal adjudication process. Separating children from their parents will result in unnecessary harm and irreparable trauma for all concerned. We call on our leaders to fix this policy immediately by passing legislation that clarifies that mothers and fathers held for asylum proceedings may be held with their children in a common facility. Appropriating funds may be necessary to do so.

If this policy is aimed at deterring families from seeking asylum, many of whom see this as the only way to protect their children from violence in their home countries, then it is reprehensible and contrary to Biblical teaching and basic human decency. Children should never be used as tools for negotiation. The Bible is clear on this: *“Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place”* (Jeremiah 22:3).

As Cardinal Seán P. O’Malley, archbishop of Boston, put it, “I have always taught respect for the civil law and will continue to do so. But, I cannot be silent when our country’s immigration policy destroys families, traumatizes parents, and terrorizes children. The harmful and unjust policy of separating children from their parents must be ended.”

We are at a moral crossroads with a hostile climate surrounding the immigration debate in this country. In addition to family separation at our southern border, we take issue with the elimination of domestic violence as grounds for being granted

asylum; for the failure to reinstate the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program; and for the abrupt ending of Temporary Protected Status for those who have settled here in the wake of violent upheavals in their countries of origin.

Right here in Maine, there is cause for concern. We are dismayed with evidence that immigrants in Maine have been harassed by law enforcement. We are concerned as well by the drastically-reduced number of properly-vetted refugees resettled in Maine in the past year. The current state of crisis around immigrants speaks to the necessity of comprehensive immigration reform. We appeal to our elected representatives to Congress to work together to craft legislation that both honors the dignity of every human being and protects the safety of our citizens.

We urge all Mainers to take caution and be discerning with regard to the veracity of social media and television. The Most Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, recently said, "The Christian faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth...If it doesn't look like love, if it doesn't look like Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be claimed to be Christian. We are experiencing a fundamental distortion of Christian teaching, of what it means to be a follower of Jesus."

As denominational leaders in Maine, we pledge our prayers for our leaders; our support for all families, both new to our shores and those who have been here for generations; and a willingness to speak out on issues of mercy and justice that stand at the heart of our faith."