



The Intersection of Catholic Social Teaching and Migration



Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a trove of moral wisdom about how society can prioritize just laws that center on human dignity as well as how we might, as citizens, continue living lives in close alignment with God even amidst growing challenges and prominence of secularism.

It is fitting, during the year of Pope Leo XIV's election that we spend time reflecting on CST and how it guides Jesuit Refugee Service's mission. Though drawn from centuries of Biblical tradition and Theological teaching, Pope Leo XIII, who led the Church from 1878 to 1907, put words to the practice of CST in his 1891 encyclical on Capital and Labor titled "Rerum Novarum."

What arose during a time of radical changes in politics, the global economy, and society, in the late 1800's, with the Industrial Revolution at its height, "Rerum Novarum" advocated for workers' rights including the right to fair wages and the ability to form unions.

He provided a balanced vision that rejected extreme ideologies and emphasized the protection of human dignity. Just as we know Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were forcibly displaced themselves when Jesus was born, Pope Leo XIII drew the connection between workers and Jesus: "Is He not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" he asked.



“We need to remember that the call of Jesus is constant, urging us to perceive the needs of others and to act.

His Eminence, Robert Cardinal McElroy

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Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and JRS

At the beginning of summer 2025, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., Cardinal McElroy spoke at a JRS/USA event on Catholic Social Teaching and Solidarity with Refugees.

During his address, his Eminence said: “In the book of Genesis, we see the beauty of God’s creation, which is bestowed as a gift upon each of us. And it points so powerfully to the universal destination of material goods which Catholic Social Thought teaches is at the heart of understanding material goods in our world.

In light of that, how can we not think that this action in eliminating the government’s meager, but so crucial, assistance to those in need of clinics and health, vaccines, and food services throughout the world, is not utterly contrary to everything about the Gospel and about our life as disciples of Jesus Christ?”

Migration: A Matter of Faith and Justice

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) offers a clear moral foundation for how we respond to forced migration. At Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, we believe that our faith calls us to stand with forcibly displaced people through a commitment to accompaniment, service, and advocacy.

We do not merely serve refugees—we walk alongside them. Our advocacy work elevates their voices, honors their agency, and promotes policy solutions grounded in human dignity and shared responsibility.

Today, millions are displaced by conflict, violence, persecution, and environmental disasters. In response, JRS/USA advocates for policies that uphold the right to stay, migrate, and return—what Pope Francis called “freedom of movement anchored in human dignity.” This means:

- **Creating the conditions that allow people to remain in their home communities.**
- **Protecting safe and legal pathways for those who are forced to flee.**
- **Supporting opportunities for return and reintegration where possible.**

These are not just policy choices. They are moral decisions rooted in our Catholic tradition and commitment to the common good.

“The right to stay” is a Catholic principle affirming that every person and family should be able to live safely, securely, and with opportunity in their homeland. Rooted in Pope Leo XIII’s 1888 encyclical *Quam Aerumnosa* (“How Sad” or “How Cruel”), this teaching expresses sorrow that people are ever forced to leave their countries due to violence, poverty, or persecution. While JRS often serves where this right has already been lost, we continue to advocate for policies that address the root causes of displacement so all may have the chance to remain and thrive at home.



Principles that Guide our Work

1. Dignity of the Human Person

Every human life is sacred. Catholic teaching insists that policies and systems must protect the life and dignity of all, especially those who are displaced, marginalized, or in crisis. Our advocacy uplifts this principle by working to protect access to asylum, restore refugee assistance programs, and preserve legal pathways to safety.

2. The Common Good

The well-being of each person is linked to the well-being of all. Pope Francis reminds us that a just society must ensure the conditions that allow all to thrive. We advocate for humane, fair, and efficient immigration and refugee policies that strengthen families, communities, and civil society.

3. Subsidiarity and Participation

Those closest to a challenge should have a voice in its resolution. Refugees must be heard—not merely helped. JRS supports programs that are refugee-led, community-driven, and designed to ensure displaced people participate in shaping their futures.

4. Solidarity

Solidarity is more than empathy—it is action. It means standing with refugees in their pursuit of justice. Our advocacy is rooted in this call to shared humanity and mutual responsibility, informed by our presence in over 50 countries around the world.

From the Field:

Around the world, JRS lives out these principles our programs in Afghanistan are a quintessential example.



More than 8.2 million people in Afghanistan have fled their homes in one of the world's most severe and protracted situations of displacement.

Those fleeing have mostly sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran, but a significant increase in deportations from both have left hundreds of thousands of Afghan returnees and internally displaced people (IDP's) in extreme danger.

Between October and December of 2023 alone, at least half a million people were forced to return to Afghanistan, despite the worsening humanitarian situation there. Afghans face multi-faceted challenges including conflict and violence, humanitarian violations in the form of Defacto Authorities-imposed restrictions, droughts, severe economic strife, and food insecurity.

JRS Afghanistan accompanies thousands of these individuals amidst these challenges. Herat, a city in northwest Afghanistan, hosts one of the highest numbers of returnees and IDP's. There, JRS has implemented educational programs, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and community empowerment activities for both youth and adults.

Over 2,300 people have participated in JRS Afghanistan's programming that is funded, in part, by generous supporters of JRS/USA. The four-pronged program consists of youth empowerment courses, community learning and recreational activities, strategies to improve social cohesion, and MHPSS programs.

“
I express my gratitude to JRS for having transformed our family through art and play activities, providing us a world of play, learning, and laughter
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ZAHRA*, A YOUNG PARTICIPANT IN JRS AFGHANISTAN'S YOUTH PROGRAM

In Afghanistan's dire situation, youth face some of the most severe, long-term consequences as they stand at the intersection between malnutrition, violence, and lack of access to education.

From the start, JRS identified the need for specific programming aimed at improving youth confidence and self-esteem. This is accomplished through skills training, volunteering opportunities, and safe spaces to foster community development.

“Our lives have taken a positive turn at the JRS Community Development Center,” said Zahra*, a young girl who, with her 11 siblings, has participated in the JRS Youth Program. “We no longer focus on our problems, instead we focus on activities like games, drawing, and storytelling sessions that give me hope for a brighter future.”

In a city where cultural differences can cause tension, the Community Development Center hosts a variety of activities for youth to have fun and play with one another irrespective of their backgrounds. These activities provide a space for youth to build social cohesion and understanding and relieve stress induced by the challenges of displacement.

MHPSS is integrated into all JRS programming as we understand the importance of mental health in helping returnees and IDP's rebuild their lives. Fatima*, another young girl who participates in activities at the Community Development Center, reflected on her experiences with anxiety and depression.

“Although a bright student in my class, I lost interest in everything and locked myself in my house,” she said, explaining how losing her father in an explosion and the concern she has for her mother and siblings infringes on her ability to cope. “The friendly approach of the JRS social worker helped me overcome the negativity in my life.”





Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organization serving refugees and other forcibly displaced people. JRS's mission is to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future. Founded as a work of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1980, JRS today works in 58 countries worldwide to meet the educational, health, and social needs of more than one million refugees.