



NEWS RELEASE

DIOCESE OF ERIE

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A Statement from Bishop Lawrence Persico on Immigration

We have come to a challenging moment in the history of our nation.

The debate over immigration has raged since President Donald Trump ordered the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border and suspended the U.S. refugee resettlement program, temporarily banning entry of all citizens from seven majority-Muslim countries.

All of us are concerned about our country's safety, and I support efforts to minimize terrorist risks, but establishing religious criteria to admit refugees is not in the spirit of America's Constitution or of the Gospel. Prejudice does a disservice to the vast majority of immigrants and refugees.

I join my fellow bishops throughout the United States in expressing deep concern over the religious freedom issues that a refugee ban raises. On Jan. 31, the chairmen of three U.S. bishops' committees stated "that welcoming the stranger and protecting the vulnerable lie at the core of the Christian life." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also has denounced the construction of a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico. Following the words of Pope Francis, we, as Catholics, must seek to build bridges instead.

The Diocese of Erie has stood—and will continue to stand—in solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and anyone seeking a better life, free from violence and persecution.

Since the 1970s, the diocese has been a leader in the settlement of refugees. Our Catholic Charities Counseling and Adoption Services refugee resettlement program, which for many

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years was steered by Father John Santor, has welcomed and advocated for nearly 3,000 refugees sent to our region by the United States government.

Many members of Catholic parishes throughout northwest Pennsylvania have helped refugees settle into new homes, jobs and lives. The Sisters of St. Joseph, the Sisters of Mercy and the Benedictine Sisters of Erie all have welcomed refugee families and raised awareness about immigration issues for many years.

History has not always been kind to refugees and immigrants. More than a century ago, Catholic immigrants from Europe were feared and despised. They were denounced as criminals determined to undermine American values. Despite this prejudice, they relied on their Catholic faith and the strength of their families. They worked hard, built strong parish communities and made significant contributions to American society. How can we dare close the door on those who follow?

According to Joe Haas of the Catholic Charities refugee resettlement program, refugees who settle in our region become economically self-sufficient within eight months of arrival. They buy cars and homes. They open small businesses and contribute to the regional economy.

Not too long ago, many of them faced the refugees' singularly horrific journey of fear and danger. These "huddled masses" looked, with hope, to America. The Catholic Church has reached out, knowing that society benefits from their indomitable spirit.

In situations that are divisive, we need to pray for unity and calm. We need to pray for those who are suffering. Therefore, I invite the people of the diocese – and all people of goodwill – to join me March 17-18 for "24 Hours for the Lord," a day of prayer, reconciliation and Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament at St. Peter Cathedral in downtown Erie. Now is the time to share our faith. Now is the time to defend the rights of all God's people.

I also encourage parishes in our 13 counties to hold holy hours devoted to the intention of immigrants and refugees in our midst. There is too much division today; too much rancor. Prayer is needed to look within ourselves and to reach out to those on the peripheries who need our help.

Please take time to read *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, a statement by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. A video presentation on refugee resettlement in the Diocese of Erie also is available at www.cccas.org.

Reflection and prayer will embolden us to take action on behalf of the least among us.