

Letter of Deep Concern to DHS Secretary John Kelly from Catholic Religious Leaders

February 24, 2017

The Honorable John F. Kelly, Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
United States Government
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Kelly,

As leaders representing national Catholic advocacy organizations and religious orders, we are deeply troubled by the pattern of arrests, detentions and deportations of undocumented immigrants across the nation – including violating the previous policy of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) not to conduct enforcement actions at or near “sensitive locations,” including churches and their ministries to the poor and vulnerable.

Your memo of February 21, 2017 to agency heads, which expands the number of immigrants who can be detained and deported under the new executive orders signed by President Trump, and which potentially includes DACA recipients and their parents, only deepens our concern. Already the action of ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials has spread fear in immigrant communities across the country, torn apart their families, and violated the values and rights that we are justly proud of as a nation of immigrants.

In early February, the Cardinal archbishop of Boston, Sean O’Malley, joined Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and the police commissioner to deliver a message of solidarity with the city’s immigrant community. Cardinal O’Malley said: “When this church was built, all the faithful were immigrants, poor – like my family, like Mayor Walsh’s family – who came from Ireland at a time when there were so many dying of hunger.” Then, addressing the church packed with immigrants and their families, he offered a word to them:

“Having spent my entire priesthood working with people newly arrived from other countries, many of whom were undocumented workers fleeing the wars and violence of Central America, I have seen up close the pain and suffering visited upon families who are forced by circumstances to live in the shadows, always fearful of discovery, and economic ruin ... Just as we are a country of immigrants, so we are a Church of immigrants, and the Church in the United States has always stood with people who have come to this country from other lands.”

Some of us have had the occasion to meet with you when you served as commander of the United States Southern Command to express our concerns about human rights. We recognize that you are a person formed by Catholic values and proud of his faith and heritage. That gives us reason to address you in terms of shared values and the teachings of our Church.

We view President Trump's recent executive orders on immigrants and refugees, as well as the actions of ICE and CBP agents, as sowing seeds of conflict between our nation and our churches, synagogues and mosques, threatening our religious freedom, and criminalizing and penalizing acts of charity toward immigrants and their families (recent arrivals as well as those who have been here for decades). We are equally concerned about the fate of refugees and asylum-seekers who have well-founded fears of being persecuted if they are returned to violence in the countries from which they have fled, and who ought to enjoy the protection of the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act.

That we are in this situation is in no small measure a reflection of the failure of leadership and political divisions that have placed ideologies and self-interest above genuine concern for the most vulnerable of human beings. That we have been unable, as a nation, to reform our broken immigration system is a sign of how deeply we are in need, as a people, of conversion, and of returning to the values that did indeed make this country great.

Intentionally sowing fear and division has no place in a democracy, yet we are concerned that the executive orders of the President and the actions of ICE and CBP agents are doing just that. Nor do these actions provide the citizens of our country with greater security but rather, we believe, it does just the opposite – creating more division, more hatred, more suffering and greater insecurity for our people.

We plead with you, as a fellow Catholic, and as a person descended from Irish immigrants, to listen to the current appeals of immigrants and refugees, listen to the words of the leaders of our Church, and to our Gospel mandate. Surely you have been moved, as we have, by the words and actions of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who could not be clearer in his defense of immigrants and refugees. Speaking as recently as last week, Pope Francis told participants at the Sixth International Forum on Migration and Peace:

“We have a duty toward our brothers and sisters who, for various reasons, have been forced to leave their homeland: a duty of justice, of civility, of solidarity.” Referring to the duty of justice, and addressing the root causes of migration, he said: *“We can no longer sustain unacceptable economic inequality. We cannot allow for persons and entire peoples to have a right only to gather the remaining crumbs.”* Commenting on the duty of civility, he said: *“Our commitment to migrants, exiles and refugees is an application of those principles and values of welcome and fraternity.”* In the face of countless tragedies, conflicts, persecutions and violence, *“the duty of solidarity is born precisely from the capacity to understand the needs of our brothers and sisters who are in difficulty and to take responsibility for these needs.”*

You may remember Proposition 187, a ballot initiative passed in California in 1994, and later declared unconstitutional, that prohibited undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health, education or social services, and threatened to punish anyone who provided these services, including teachers, doctors, lay people and clergy. At that time, the Catholic archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahoney, directed all employees of the archdiocese to continue to provide these services as a matter of faith and humanitarian concern.

Your recent memo threatens to penalize not only undocumented immigrants, but “those who facilitate their presence in the United States.” Does that include anyone, who out of charitable concern, offers help to undocumented immigrants? Does it include mothers or fathers, who out

of concern for the survival of their children, facilitate their escape from violence and their journey north to ask for asylum?

We ask you now to reconsider your recent words and actions. We believe they fan fear and contribute to a pattern of discrimination, hatred, violence and abuse against undocumented immigrants and refugees, separating families, and causing untold suffering of men, women and children. We do not want to return to the shameful days when Japanese Americans were herded into concentration camps during the Second World War, nor to the time when Europeans watched Jews being deported and were afraid to speak up, becoming complicit by their silence in that horrendous fate. Neither should we forget that the United States in 1939 refused to allow the ship St. Louis to land, thereby denying entry to 907 Jewish refugees, some of whom later perished in the Holocaust.

We ask you to affirm your commitment to instruct ICE and CBP agents to avoid “sensitive locations,” such as churches and church property, and to respect our religious freedom to respond with mercy and compassion to immigrants and refugees, regardless of their legal status. We ask, as well, that you affirm your commitment to the importance of refugee resettlement, so that faith communities and others can continue to minister to these vulnerable populations.

Remember Pope Francis’ words: “Protecting the world’s migrants and refugees is a moral imperative.” We must place ourselves in the shoes of migrants. We must be “people who sympathize with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognize the values and resources they have to offer, and open ourselves to sharing humanly and materially” with them.

Thank you for taking the time to hear our concerns. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person, and to share the impact that these actions are having on the immigrant and refugee communities we serve. We look forward to hearing from you. Your reply can be mailed to the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, ATTN: Jean Stokan, 8380 Colesville Road, Suite 300, Silver Spring, MD 20910, or via email to jstokan@sistersofmercy.org.

Sincerely,

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