



## A Message from the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey

December 22, 2015

America has always been a light to the world – a land of hope, freedom and prosperity. So why should we be surprised that poor neighbors, and persecuted refugees would want to come to America? Since the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock, since the potato famine struck Ireland, and even until today – poor immigrants and suffering refugees have crossed the ocean and walked through deserts to reach our great land. Some were welcomed; however, many others met discrimination.

This Christmas season, choirs across the world will sing out *Peace on Earth - Good Will to Men*. Yet, as those choirs sing, some 60 million people worldwide will have been displaced – representing the largest number of displaced men, women and children since World War II. From the Syrian conflict alone, millions of families have fled their homeland.

This year, as we retell the Christmas story, let us remember that Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled the violence of Herod as refugees seeking a safe haven in Egypt; and let us recognize that millions of today's refugees share the same plight faced by the Holy Family.

In recent years, millions of our neighbors from Latin America – suffering from poverty and violence - have been seeking safe haven in America. We need to ask: how are they being met? Any analysis would indicate that *we the people* have not met the Scriptural standard for welcoming these strangers. Scriptural standards are high. The Hebrew Scriptures call on the people of God to have compassion for the stranger:

*You shall not oppress a stranger; you well know how a stranger feels, since you were once strangers yourselves in the land of Egypt. Exodus 23:9*

Our Gospels continue the Hebrew theme of welcoming the stranger:

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. Matthew 25:35-40*

Welcoming strangers can be risky and inconvenient, and our national leaders always must act with regard for the safety and wellbeing of the citizens of this great land. But safe and convenient lives are not the narrow gate to which Jesus calls us. Jesus calls us to go beyond our comfort zone, and when we do, he always will provide for us. Recall when his apostles were caught in a storm at sea: they feared for their lives. As the Apostles were filled with fear, Jesus approached their boat and said ***“Be not afraid.”*** And he calmed the sea.

Today, many see the world swirling in a storm far worse than the storm the Apostles faced on the Sea of Galilee. So, how can we ***Be not afraid?*** Just a short while ago in Kenya, Pope Francis told us the way:

*...we see ever more clearly the need for inter-religious understanding, friendship and collaboration in defending the God-given dignity of individuals and peoples, and their right to live in freedom and happiness ... the God whom we seek to serve is a God of peace. His holy Name must never be used to justify hatred and violence ... we must be peacemakers who invite others to live in peace, harmony and mutual respect!*

*Pope Francis, November 2015*

By calling us to live in peace, harmony and mutual respect, Pope Francis challenges us to move from *feel good thoughts* to real *action* - action that has the potential to show our nation how to welcome strangers, while still protecting our families and communities.

In this season of peace, joy and new beginnings, we, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, call on the faithful and all *people of good will* to join us in renewing our commitment to caring for and assisting immigrants, refugees and the poor. So many immigrants are just refugees; like Jesus, Mary and Joseph – they are fleeing persecution, suffering and death.

On New Year’s Day 2016, many of us will make *Resolutions*. This year, let each of us resolve to do our personal part to help our communities to live in peace, harmony and mutual respect.

This year, let each of us echo the words of Jesus by telling our families and friends: “***Be not afraid.***”

This year, in the face of international violence and hatred, let us be heralds of hope and peace. Together, in prayer, let us call for an end of the harsh rhetoric that spawns hatred and fear. If we do so, we will be able to sing out: “**Peace on Earth - Good Will to All.**”

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