

## An Ash Wednesday Statement on Immigration from the California Catholic Conference of Bishops

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Sacramento, CA – Today marks the beginning of the Lenten Season, a time when Christian people devote ourselves more intentionally to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in an earnest effort to reform our lives in the image of Jesus Christ. We use this occasion to call upon Catholics and all people of good will in California and throughout the United States to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and excluded in our society. Urgent attention needs to be given to our neighbors who are migrants and refugees, especially those immigrants who are undocumented. They are being unjustly targeted and vilified. We are deeply concerned about the possibility of widespread deportations that will break up families and break down our communities. Fear is now growing in our neighborhoods and schools. The work of businesses and farms is being disrupted. We seem to be turning away from our nation's long history of renewal and innovation inspired by successive generations of immigrants and refugees. We are a nation of immigrants. We have a long history of welcoming those fleeing violence in other countries. We should not turn our back on this proud legacy, especially in this current moment in our history. As pastors, we witness firsthand every day the fear in our communities. We call upon the new Administration and Congress in Washington to do everything in their power to ease the climate of fear that is now gripping our communities. It is long past time for our leaders to stop allowing this issue to be used for political advantage and set themselves to the task of fixing our broken immigration system. The principles and priorities for immigration reform are well-known and they are reasonable. We urgently need reforms in our visa and guest worker programs. We need reforms that keep families together and recognize that those who are detained already have the legal right of due process. We need to provide those who are here and contribute to our economy and society but without documentation an immediate path to regularize their status with an eye to one day becoming citizens. Some concrete measures are already under consideration. In Congress, the Federal BRIDGE Act, S.128/H.R. 496, for instance, will protect DACA students (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). In Sacramento, the California Values Act, SB 54, would protect the safety and well-being of all Californians by ensuring that state and local resources are not used to assist in deportations that would separate families. It would also do so by having the effect of reducing crime, since undocumented persons would not fear approaching a law enforcement office to report a crime. We support these proposals as well as other reasonable steps to address immigration in a compassionate, thoughtful manner and we encourage our political leaders to find bi-partisan solutions. The Catholic bishops of California and the United States support the federal government's obligation to protect our borders and to uphold our immigration laws. We also hold that these legal principles should always be at the service of human dignity and the common good of society. The current immigration system is gravely flawed. And because it is gravely flawed, the current push to increase enforcement and deportations — without first reforming the underlying system — can only lead to further violations of human rights and human dignity. Just as the Church works to protect the life of the unborn and to support the unemployed, the homeless and the hungry, so we pledge our continued support to migration and refugee programs. Our parishes and social services, such as Catholic Charities, must remain in solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters. We ask all people of faith to work with their neighbors to welcome and accompany those who are afraid and uncertain. We need to try to better understand and empathize with one another. Recognizing that we all share the same human condition and the same deepest hopes and desires will help us to combat the anxiety and uncertainty in ourselves and

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the nation. During this Lenten season we will hear the familiar refrain from Psalm 95, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” The Lord God always hears the cry of the poor. God is all merciful and we are judged by how we see, hear, and act in accordance with that mercy. May our fasting, penance, charity and solidarity help us to live as one people under God’s merciful gaze.

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