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Robert J. Carlson, Archbishop of St. Louis | Pastoral Message on Immigration & Reconciliation

“Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy...”

It is with these opening words from the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi in my heart and mind that I wish to address the faithful of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the people of good will in this pastoral message on immigration and reconciliation.

As a people of God and citizens of this great nation, we have remained attentive to the immigrant history, culture and identity that binds us together as a striving, welcoming and flourishing society. We know that our former immigrant generations and relatives also faced hate and discrimination. Yet, our core values as Americans have reflected the best of who we are and who we desire to be. With great resolve, the early wave of European immigrants to this nation built neighborhoods, towns, cities and a common way of life that revealed their respect for the human dignity of each person, and their collective aspirations for the best of democratic processes and civic engagement.

Similarly, in our faith journey, our Gospel values have never been far from our individual and institutional practices, even when we have fallen short. Through the gift of faith, we have come to experience God’s compassion and reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14-20). And, through this same gift, we have learned to live as one human family under God: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

This promise of being one in Christ, while not perfected in our time, provides for us the right direction and cadence to follow. As a pilgrim Church, our walk in and with the Lord has always compelled us to a more visible compassion: “Come you that are blessed by my Father...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25: 34-35).

This compassion for those who are hungry, thirsty and perceived to be strangers among us is a priority for us as a people of faith and Church. In our archdiocesan and parish ministries, charitable organizations and initiatives we will continue to work hard to ensure that we are reaching out to those in need, especially our immigrant and refugee sisters and brothers. Together with our partners and collaborators, we will serve with dignity, ever mindful of our shared pilgrimage on the way to the Lord (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19).

Our compassion in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger must also lead us to the deeper spiritual longing for reconciliation and solidarity found in our human heart. In the Archdiocese of St. Louis, this longing for reconciliation and solidarity with others has included the work for racial justice and comprehensive immigration reform. Over the years, we have been attentive to the brokenness in our families, neighborhoods, city and region, and endeavored to respond with intentionality and hope.

While the challenges that face us at any given time can be overwhelming, our trust in the Lord has always pointed us in the right direction. As a community of faith and Church, we have learned to be vigilant so as to better respond to the needs of our world. Today, many of our brothers and sisters are experiencing hardships due to unjust and callous structures of power that have little regard for the dignity of persons and the common good.

We are living in a time that has given rise to unprecedented number of human beings becoming strangers in their own lands. The migration and refugee crisis continues to intensify for many in our human community. More and more, we are witnesses to images of destruction, violence and religious persecution. Good and loving people are having to make difficult choices, uprooting themselves from their family and friends and placing their lives at the mercy of others. Unfortunately, the violent conditions that migrants face has led many to endure great sufferings and even tragic death.

And, here at home, we have seen how hateful speech and dehumanizing rhetoric can become a catalyst for attitudes and behaviors leading to greater discord, division and disappointment. Noticeably, this past national election revealed deep seeded resentments, anger and pain in many sectors of our society and Church. In some instances, the voice of reason and truth has given way to unrestrained fear and retaliation. Individuals from our immigrant and refugee communities are among those who are targets of discrimination, harassment and hate crimes.

As your bishop and pastor, I am concerned about the harmful impact this divisive and hate-driven cultural climate is having on our society and immigrant and refugee communities. I am particularly sensitive to the dilemmas and fears facing our Hispanic families because of the uncertainty of the unfolding political and social environment. For many of our Hispanic families, and especially for the children, the anti-immigrant sentiments and fear mongering is creating an atmosphere of deeper anxiety, withdrawal and isolation.

While much in our new political and social reality remains to be seen and may be beyond our immediate reach, what is not far from us is how each one of us chooses to respond. Today, in the spirit of compassion and reconciliation, I wish to reaffirm my own pastoral commitment to accompany our immigrant and refugee families. I want to express my pastoral compassion for these families who are in need of welcoming and loving hands. I want to say to them directly: You are not alone, I am with you.

As I have done on previous occasions, I call upon the faithful of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the people of good will to join me in solidarity with our immigrant and refugee communities. I call upon each one of us to be instrument of compassion and reconciliation. Let us bring love where hatred is sown, pardon where injury seeks the upper hand, and hope where uncertainty sways. May our commitment to walk with the immigrant and refugee be a light in the darkness for others to see and follow. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Louis the King, pray for us.