

# Unaccompanied Migrant Children Understood through a Catholic Social Teaching Context

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## Background

Throughout Scripture the poor and the vulnerable hold a special place both in Scripture and in the Catholic moral tradition. Throughout his mission Jesus held children in particular in high regard, at one rebuking the disciples for not allowing the children to come to him and declaring that we must all become like children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (MK 10:14). At another point in his ministry, Jesus issued a much sharper word of warning that it would be better that a millstone be tied around a person's neck, than for that person to cause a child to sin. We have a special obligation to ensure that children are given the protection and support due to them.

Highlighting unaccompanied migrant children in particular, Pope Benedict XVI noted that “these boys and girls often end up on the street abandoned to themselves and prey to unscrupulous exploiters who often transform them into the object of physical, moral and sexual violence.” It is the responsibility of humanitarian organizations, public institutions, and the Church to dedicate resources to protect these young migrants. This call is of particular importance today, given the humanitarian situation that is taking place along the U.S./Mexico border.

Since 2011, the United States has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of unaccompanied migrating children arriving to the country, predominately at the U.S./Mexico border. Whereas the number of children apprehended averaged 6,800 between federal fiscal years (FY) 2004 and 2011, the U.S. government estimates that more than 70,000 unaccompanied minors could enter the United States during FY2014.

While a mix of factors contribute to this uptick in migration, a generalized violence at the state and local levels and a corresponding breakdown of the rule of law has threatened citizen security and created a culture of fear and hopelessness that has functioned as the primary cause. Violence and coercion—including extortion, kidnapping, threats, and coercive and forcible recruitment of children into criminal activity—are perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations and gangs, and have become part of everyday life in all of these countries, exerting control over communities. Under such circumstances children and their parents face a stark choice: Stay and become a likely victim of the violence or make a dangerous journey to a place of possible safety.

## Catholic Social Teaching

During the twentieth century, as international migration became a particularly



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acute phenomenon, papal teaching came to emphasize the Church's commitment to caring for pilgrims, aliens, exiles, and migrants of every kind, affirming that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate. Among conditions worthy of human life is the opportunity to live in a homeland where one is not in constant fear of losing his life or the lives of his loved ones. Where such conditions persist the Church, civil society, and local and state governments need to take the steps necessary to alleviate these dangers. Recently, Bishop Eusebio Elizondo highlighted this obligation when he noted that "over the long term, the increasing violence from gangs and organized crime in their home countries must be addressed and controlled so they (children and families) can be secure in their homes."

More recent still, Pope Francis specifically referred to the influx of unaccompanied migrant children across the U.S./Mexico border as a "humanitarian emergency" that "as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected." Reflecting the pope's concerns, the bishops have promoted a series of practical policy proposals that they believe will help to create a place of welcome and protection for these children. While important in their own right it is crucial to recall that these proposals are not merely asserted but are rooted in the Catholic moral tradition. A few principles related to this tradition are worth highlighting specifically:

- **Human Dignity:** The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. The Church has an abiding concern human life from conception until natural death; the lives of migrant children do not somehow fall outside the Church's commitment to protect and nurture life at all its stages. Consequently, children who are fleeing violence and seeking safety should be given due process under the law and provided the necessary screenings to ensure that they will be given the help necessary to ensure their well-being.
- **Call to Family, Community, and Participation:** The person is not only sacred but also social. At the foundation of the social character of the person is the family—it is where we first learn how to interact with and engage the wider community. The violence and corruption present in the countries that many unaccompanied migrant children originate causes a great deal of stress on families that often lead to division and separation. Steps need to be taken to create the conditions so that families can remain in their homeland with one another, without having to constantly fear that violence will visit their doorstep and cause any one of them harm. Until that time, policies should be implemented to ensure that families are reunited here in the U.S. and provided some degree of protection for as long as it is too dangerous for them to return home.
- **Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable:** A basic moral test for any society is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment—"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me"—and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first (MT 25:35). If there ever was a vulnerable person, a migrant child who is traveling alone would certainly seem to fit that definition. To turn our back on these populations, to demonize them, and to treat them as outcasts and unwelcome directly contravenes our obligation to approach vulnerable populations with particular care.