

**Submitted by: Richard Pates, Bishop of Des Moines and Chair of the International Justice and Peace Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Bishop Pates led a solidarity visit to the Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, June 24 – July 2.**

It has been several weeks since the American public became aware of the tragedy taking place on our border with Mexico.

It involves over 57,000 children, mostly from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, who are unaccompanied by adults and whose fate, by U.S. legal standards, hangs somewhere between illegal-immigrant and refugee status.

But for those of us who are Christian – recalling Jesus’ tender compassion toward children and stories like the one about the Good Samaritan – the issue is much more than legal. The gospel compels us to care for their immediate needs, physical, emotional, spiritual – and legal.

“Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity,” said Pope Francis in a speech earlier this year. “They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.

“Fleeing from situations of extreme poverty or persecution in the hope of a better future, or simply to save their own lives, millions of persons choose to migrate. Despite their hopes and expectations, they often encounter mistrust, rejection and exclusion, to say nothing of tragedies and disasters which offend their human dignity.”

Iowans have a history of helping immigrants and refugees and we encourage them to open their homes to these children and families and provide any other assistance possible.

Unfortunately, some people want to deny aid, reverting to a “we first” attitude. Others want to deny due process to these families, indiscriminately sending them home to possible harm, including death. Christians must take a different approach, following the example of Jesus himself.

Addressing immigrants’ immediate needs is not enough, however. It is often proposed that long-term resolution lies in building walls and focusing on border enforcement. But do not sustainable resolutions also reside with our nation addressing the root causes of migration from the South? And that’s hard to do because U.S. policies or practices are at least partially responsible for the current state.

Among the U.S. causes of migration is our insatiable appetite for illicit drugs, which results in continual violence, gang activity, the breakup of families and poverty – all factors that contribute to the need to migrate. Then there are the mining and other operations by U.S. and Canadian corporations that seek to exploit the resources of poor countries. In the process, they spoil the

environment, contaminate water supplies, divide communities, and leave a string of broken promises of development.

CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement, may have seemed like a good idea at the time the second version was signed in 2005. But my church colleagues in the area say the agreement has devastated rural residents and small farmers who can't compete in international trade. That directly causes families to migrate.

Finally, something needs to be done to bolster the economies of our Central American neighbors so residents can lead productive, fulfilling lives at home. Some observers have suggested a program similar to the Marshall Plan, officially the European Recovery Program, which revitalized Europe after the Second World War.

That kind of program should appeal not only to Christians, but to everyone who wants to help our neighbors and to solve the long-term problem of migration to the U.S. It's not a matter of sentimentality, but of a search for practical solutions that will help us and them.

From an American perspective, mass migration across our borders strains public services and results in human and economic costs. From the migrants' perspective, it means leaving everything they most cherish. From my visits to the area, I know that the vast majority of Central Americans would prefer to stay where they are. We should help them do it.