



# AND THEY SHALL KNOW US BY OUR **LOVE**

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Catholic Charities, Migrants and Ministry



The 167 Catholic Charities agencies across the country and in the U.S. territories often encounter our sisters and brothers at the most vulnerable times in their lives. They are seniors, veterans, natural disaster survivors, families at risk because of financial insecurities and others who feel left behind in society.

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*Migrants are an especially vulnerable population cared for by Catholic Charities staff and volunteers because they are on the move, far from home, and strangers in a strange land.*

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After being processed by federal authorities, they arrive at our sites weary from their travels. They are seeking respite — a warm meal, a hot shower and a safe place to stay for the night. Our agencies on the border are but one stop on a longer journey, from government custody to immigration court, often from poverty and peril to the hope of a permanent home, a job and an education for their children — if permitted to stay.



**Welcome. Protect. Promote. Integrate.**

*In the words of Pope Francis:*

“Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age (Matthew 25:35-43). The Lord entrusts to the Church’s motherly love every person forced to leave their homeland in search of a better future. This solidarity must be concretely expressed at every stage of the migratory experience — from departure through journey to arrival and return. This is a great responsibility, which the Church intends to share with all believers and men and women of good will, who are called to respond to the many challenges of contemporary migration with generosity, promptness, wisdom and foresight, each according to their own abilities.

In this regard, I wish to reaffirm that our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: **to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate.**” (*104th Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2018*)

Catholic Charities serves migrants and refugees along the border and throughout the U.S. interior by providing for basic humanitarian needs such as food, shelter and clothing; assisting families with social work case management; providing asylum-seekers with immigration legal assistance; and resettling refugees from all corners of the world.

We serve all those in need who come to us — regardless of immigration status or faith — not because they are Catholic, but because we are. **We are a church, and a nation, of immigrants.**

# The Work of a Catholic Charities Border Agency



## Warm welcome

Respite center staff and volunteers let migrants who have been processed by immigration authorities know they are now in a safe place where they will be cared for and kept from harm.

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## Food

To eat a hot meal at a table is a luxury many of us don't think twice about. Migrants have been traveling, often covering great distances on foot, with little to sustain them.

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## Clothes

Migrants sort through clean, donated clothing to replace the items they've been wearing, often for days or even weeks, with no opportunity to wash soiled garments.

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## Hygiene

Now migrants can finally wash off the dirt and dust and feel clean again, as well as receive essential hygiene supplies.



### **Medical attention**

Even the most minor illness or injury is nearly impossible to treat on the road, and many have been psychologically traumatized. This may be the first care migrants have received in some time from a doctor or social worker.

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### **A place to rest**

Catholic Charities respite centers provide just that — respite for exhausted bodies, a place to sleep without fear.

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### **Departure**

Staff and volunteers help migrants — who are detained and processed in federal detention before being given a court date and destination city — to make sense of their next steps. We then see them safely off to continue their journeys.



# The Gospel Imperative

Our work is guided and driven by Catholic social teaching and the tradition that views migrants and newcomers as human beings created in God's image, our brothers and sisters for whom Jesus gave his life. The Church does not have an immigration policy so much as an "immigrant" policy rooted in the Gospels.

## What does the Church say?

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral statement, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* (2000), written by the conference's Committee on Migration, was an important call to communion to members of the U.S. Church to receive newcomers from throughout the world with a spirit of welcome and solidarity.

This statement is grounded firmly in Catholic social teaching, which has much to say about immigration and the movement of people throughout the world and across borders.

In advocating on behalf of migrants, immigrants and refugees, it is important to understand that Catholic social teaching is derived from the Gospels and the words of Christ; Papal statements and encyclicals; and statements and pastoral letters of bishops around the world, including the bishops of the United States.

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*You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.*

– Exodus 23:9

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

– Matthew 25:35

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Scripture and Catholic tradition teach that immigrants, refugees and all forcibly displaced persons are to be cared for with dignity and respect. Our agencies recognize the inherent dignity of every person, regardless of where they come from or how they arrive in our care.

## How Catholic Charities Agencies Serve Migrants

Catholic Charities agencies nationwide would not be able to accomplish their work without the dedicated staff and volunteers who **give of their time, energy and boundless compassion**. They work tirelessly to assist migrants on their journeys, whether helping them find the appropriate size clothing from a mound of donated items, translating travel instructions for the next leg of their travels, providing nutrition and housing assistance, or giving guidance in navigating the bureaucratic complexities of continuing their immigration cases. More than anything, they are a warm, loving presence for their migrant brothers and sisters who often have experienced grave trauma en route to what they hope will be a better life.



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## Caught in the In-Between

Each has a name and a story. A family they left behind. A community they worshiped and laughed with, and sometimes cried with. They come to the United States seeking a better life, away from violence and drug trafficking; away from ecological devastation; away from collapsing social order.

The soil of their homes is still in the tracks of their worn shoes.

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\*True migrant stories. Names have been changed to protect their identities.

Illustrations: Gisela Goppel





## HEALTHY NOW, AND GIVING BACK

**Carmen**

**Age:** 36

**Location:** San Antonio

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A lack of available health care drove Carmen and her young son from Venezuela to seek treatment for what she believed was stage four cancer. When they arrived in San Antonio, their sponsor backed out.

When Carmen finally saw a doctor, her diagnosis was not cancer but endometriosis, a painful but treatable condition.

Carmen now volunteers with migrants who are staying in hotels through the Humanitarian Relief Program. Because she received the care she so urgently needed, she has the energy to give back and no longer worries about what will happen to her son without her.



## MOTHER AND DAUGHTER, REUNITED

**Angelica**

**Age:** 46

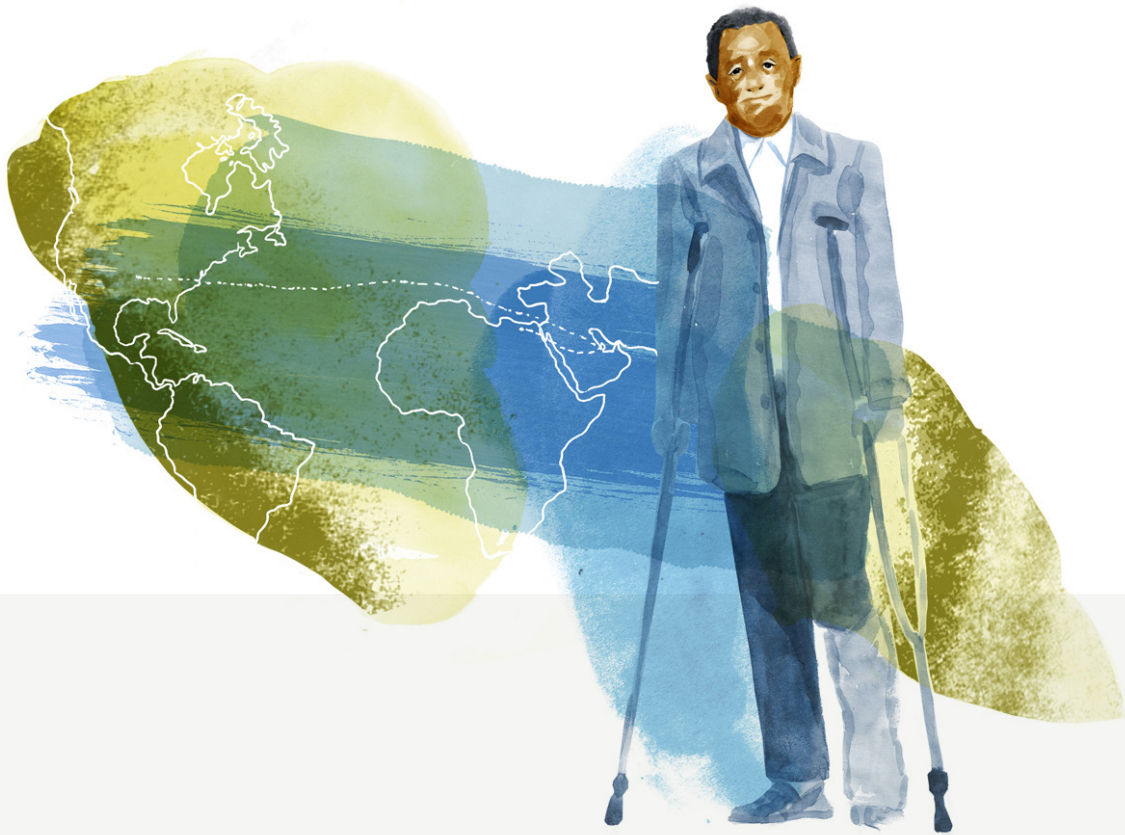
**Location:** Laredo

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After Angelica proudly became a police officer in her Venezuelan community, she was targeted as a traitor by a new administration. She was told to flee or be imprisoned.

In Mexico, her 18-year-old daughter was threatened with kidnapping so they swam across the river to Texas. They were picked up and separated in detention.

Upon release, Angelica waited at the Catholic Charities Laredo shelter for her daughter, cooking Venezuelan food and cheering the other migrants with her presence. The two were reunited and now live with an aunt in Miami.



### **A MIGRANT, ONCE AGAIN**

**Omar**

**Age:** 50

**Location:** Laredo

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Originally from Egypt, Omar had a successful small business in Qatar before the threats and demands for money began. Afraid and unable to appease his extortionists, he left his adopted country behind.

He arrived in Laredo with a broken leg, a souvenir from the long journey. Still, he was a cheerful, dignified presence, always wearing his businessman's trench coat.

Omar hopes to settle in Louisiana where he will work at a friend's business. He knows how to build a new life in a new place. He's done it before.





## KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

**Vivian**

**Age:** 25

**Location:** San Diego

When Vivian arrived in San Diego with her 6-year-old daughter, she shared a painful story.

Vivian's police officer husband in Brazil abused her mentally and physically for years and abused their child, as well. Friends, family – even a local judge – were either too afraid or too close to her husband to help. She survived an assault on the journey and arrived bruised and with a fractured rib cage, but alive.

Now living in New England, Vivian has received case management and legal, medical and housing assistance. Most importantly, she has hope for a new life.



## **FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

**Svitlana**

**Age:** 41

**Location:** San Diego

Svitlana fled the war in Ukraine, but her husband, a naturalized American citizen, remained behind to fight.

She was detained at the U.S. border for six days and threatened with detention in an ICE facility, despite being married to an American citizen. Her family was frantic when they contacted Catholic Charities in San Diego.

Through the efforts of CC Immigrant Services, she was released and reunited with her family in New Jersey. They texted: “We met my sister ... We are so happy. She is already safe! I am infinitely grateful to you for your help and support!”



## The Migrant Story is A Human Story

In the Catholic community, we honor migrants and newcomers. We identify them as our brothers and sisters, and see in their vulnerability and need the face of God. They live in our families, fill our pews, work in our agencies and receive our services.

At its heart, the migrant's story is a human story — as old as the story of Mary and Joseph seeking room at the inn — and our ministry is a humanitarian one.

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*“Migrants trust that they will encounter acceptance, solidarity, and help, that they will meet people who will sympathize with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognize the values and resources the latter have to offer, and are open to sharing humanly and materially with the needy and disadvantaged.”*

— Pope Francis

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# FAQs about Our Service to Immigrants

For the latest news and statements by Catholic Charities USA, visit our immigration ministry page: [www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/catholic-charities-usa-on-immigration/](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/catholic-charities-usa-on-immigration/)

## **What does Catholic Charities do?**

Catholic Charities' 167 member agencies and 3,500 locations serve vulnerable people in our country — including migrants — wherever they need us. The themes of compassion, inclusion and accompaniment permeate the work agencies do in the areas of affordable housing, integrated health, food and nutrition, immigration and refugee services, disaster services and social enterprise initiatives. From housing those who are experiencing homelessness to staffing food pantries, and from responding to natural disasters to providing job training, our staff and volunteers meet those in need where they are and help them get where they hope to be.

## **Why does Catholic Charities do this work?**

The Gospel of Matthew calls Christians to see everyone as “Christ” in the flesh. Christ said those who cared for him were “blessed.” *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* – Matthew 25:35

It is our sincerely held religious belief that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. The social services ministry of Catholic Charities is also the ministry of the Catholic Church.

## **Does Catholic Charities assist migrants?**

Catholic Charities agencies, especially those on the U.S.-Mexico border, assist migrants who have been held in detention centers and released after processing by the federal government, pending court proceedings. Many have come seeking asylum, a right that is granted by international and U.S. law to people who present themselves at a country's border. Agencies served nearly 18,000 asylum-seekers in 2020.



Catholic Charities agencies also provided resettlement services to almost 3,600 refugees in 2020 and welcomed increased numbers of Afghan arrivals and Ukrainian refugees in 2021 and early 2022. Refugee resettlement services can include helping find housing, employment, health care and schooling for children.

### **What happens at a Catholic Charities respite center?**

Respite center staff and the many volunteers who give generously of their time provide a range of services to migrants, who often arrive after long, tiring journeys with little to their names but the clothes on their backs.

At a Catholic Charities site, these men, women and families find a safe, welcoming environment in which to rest for the night, bathe, change into clean clothes (typically donated), eat a nourishing meal and prepare to depart on the next step of their journey. Their immigration paperwork, provided by the federal government, determines their next steps. If possible, staff will refer migrants to a Catholic Charities agency in their destination city for case management and other services they might require as they prepare for their immigration hearings.

### **Does Catholic Charities transport migrants from the border?**

No. Migrants coordinate their travel with family members. In some instances, Catholic Charities agencies may help migrants — frequently non-English speakers who have been processed and released by federal authorities — coordinate travel to their destination cities to continue their immigration cases. The location is typically a city in which the migrant has family members or friends who can act as a sponsor, and migrants or their families are expected to pay for their transportation.

Catholic Charities plays no role in determining migrants' destinations, and transportation is only funded by social services agencies, such as Catholic Charities, as a last resort.

### **Does Catholic Charities work in coordination with the government?**

We work closely with local, state and federal governments. They all need our help and have requested assistance from us and other faith-based organizations. Our staff and hundreds of volunteers do the work on the ground that the government can't: care for those who are homeless, hungry, disaster-stricken,

out-of-work and suffering. This includes serving both vulnerable U.S. citizens and migrants, and we are proud to do so.

### **Is Catholic Charities' engagement with migrants political in nature?**

The work of Catholic Charities is humanitarian, not political, and has continued under multiple presidential administrations since our founding more than a century ago.

Catholic Charities USA recognizes that the United States must regulate its borders and urges policymakers to create humane, orderly and sustainable processes to do so. The planning and execution of these processes should include humanitarian service providers so they can determine their own capacity when called upon to serve.

We further urge both political parties and all Americans to avoid politicizing vulnerable human beings seeking a better life — whether they are U.S. citizens or migrants from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Mexico, Venezuela or any country experiencing unlivable conditions because of war, violence or economic instability.

### **Is Catholic Charities' humanitarian work at the border lawful?**

Yes, and in fact, it is done in coordination with federal, state and city authorities. The Catholic Church upholds the right of all nations to control their borders and the flow of migrants within. Catholic Charities neither condones nor takes part in illegal activity and respects our country's immigration laws even as we advocate for their reform. We believe that justice, mercy and the common good can and should be the foundation of our immigration system, and this is the reform for which we call — and for which we urge you to call, as well.

### **How does Catholic Charities help to combat human trafficking?**

Catholic Charities agencies at the border and in the interior work closely with government partners and other faith-based organizations to combat human trafficking. Many Catholic Charities staff have specialized training and skills to screen and detect signs of trafficking among migrants, who are particularly at risk, and will refer cases to appropriate local, state and federal government agencies for further action. In addition, these agencies also provide intensive trauma-



focused care by providing counseling, transition support services, and culturally and linguistically competent case management services to survivors of trafficking.

**What is Catholic Charities USA's position on the immigration system?**

Along with the Catholic Church, we uphold the fundamental right of a person to migrate in order to preserve lives and families, which may mean leaving one's country of origin in order to flee violence or climate devastation. Current U.S. immigration policies have long been unsustainable — for both Americans and migrants, the latter of whom are often subjected to indefinite imprisonment, separation of families and denial of basic social services — and we urgently call upon Congress to begin comprehensive reform of this broken system.

**The asylum process seems complicated. Is it?**

The U.S. immigration system is a dizzying array of rules and regulations pertaining to the definition, entry and status of foreigners. The laws regulating the entry of refugees and asylum-seekers are especially complex, involving multiple government agencies. As of March 2022, there were 1.75 million active cases pending before U.S. immigration courts. Asylum cases can take years to be adjudicated.

The Hope Border Institute in El Paso “Guide to Asylum at the Border” flow chart ([hopeborder.org](https://hopeborder.org)) demonstrates how complex the process of applying for asylum really is, and this article provides an in-depth look at how the U.S. immigration system works ([www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/how-united-states-immigration-system-works](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/how-united-states-immigration-system-works)).



The mission of Catholic Charities is to provide service to people in need, to advocate for justice in social structures, and to call the entire church and other people of good will to do the same.

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