

Catholic bishops across US condemn separation of migrant children

Rhina Guidos - Catholic News Service

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From Denver to New York City, the country's Catholic bishops have joined a chorus of organizations, institutions and high-profile individuals urging the Trump administration to stop separating children from their parents as they seek respite in the U.S. from dire conditions in their home countries, largely in Central America.

None have been more outspoken, however, than the bishops with dioceses on or near the border between the U.S. and Mexico, where many migrants, adults as well as children, are being held in detention centers in geographic areas where many of the prelates come into contact with families affected.

"Refugee children belong to their parents, not to the government or other institution. To steal children from their parents is a grave sin, immoral (and) evil," said San Antonio's Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller June 14 via Twitter, the social media platform he has used to daily call attention to the situation.

"Their lives have already been extremely difficult. Why do we (the U.S.) torture them even more, treating them as criminals?" he continued.

In a June 5 interview with CBS News, U.S Attorney General Jeff Sessions said: "If people don't want to be separated from their children, they should not bring them with them," meaning they shouldn't bring them along when trying to cross the border, which many do as they seek asylum. The furor over the separation of children from a parent or parents had already started in late May, before Sessions used a Bible passage to justify the actions.

Bishop Daniel E. Flores of the Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, said via Twitter May 31 that "separating immigrant parents and children as a supposed deterrent to immigration is a cruel and reprehensible policy. Children are not instruments of deterrence, they are children. A government that thinks any means is suitable to achieve an end cannot secure justice for anyone."



In this photo provided by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, people who've been taken into custody related to cases of illegal entry into the United States, rest in one of the cages at a facility in McAllen, Texas, Sunday, June 17, 2018. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Rio Grande Valley Sector via AP)

But the outrage began in earnest after the June 14 speech to law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, when Sessions said the practice of separating families is consistent with the teachings of the Bible because "persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order."

The following day, New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan said during CNN's "Cuomo Prime Time with Chris Cuomo" that while he appreciated Sessions quoting the Bible, the quote he used was not the best.

"For one, St. Paul always says we should obey the law of the government if that law is in conformity with the Lord's law, all right? No pun intended but God's law trumps man's law, all right?" he said.

"And St. Paul himself who gave the quote that the attorney general used, he wouldn't obey Roman law when it said it was mandatory to worship the emperor," the cardinal continued. "He wouldn't obey that law. I don't think we should obey a law that goes against what God intends that you would take a baby, a child, from their mom. I mean, that's just unjust. That's unbiblical. That's un-American. There could be no Bible passage that would justify that."

After Sessions' Bible quote, Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, also used the Bible to make a point and compared Christ's time as a refugee in the Holy Land to the migrants.

In a June 15 statement, he compared the distance from his diocese to other localities in Guatemala and Mexico, saying that "if Jesus of Nazareth returned, as at that time, from Galilee to Judea, ... we dare say he would not get as far as Sacred Heart Church downtown (in El Paso) before being detained."

He urged Christians to think about the families fleeing and seeking asylum in the U.S., what they're going through and said that what's at stake "is the fundamental question of being Christian today, of being a person of faith today in our country and on the continent that is suffering an hour of Christ's passion."

Bishop Seitz announced a public prayerful procession "in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who continue to migrate to our border" planned for the evening of July 20 in El Paso but did not release other details. The U.S. bishops also are talking about the possibility of a delegation of prelates going to the detention centers where many children are being held.

In mid-June, The Associated Press said this year "nearly 2,000 children have been separated from their families at the U.S. border over a six-week period during a crackdown on illegal entries," according to documents from the Department of Homeland Security, which operates Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Two prelates from Colorado, Denver Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila and Denver Auxiliary Bishop Jorge Rodriguez, repeated what other bishops have said in June 18 statement, saying that while borders must be protected, the policy of separating families is "immoral" and urged that it be terminated immediately, saying those being detained are in need of protection.

"These children and their parents are often fleeing violence and our country should not add to the inhumanity of their situation," they said.