

Statement on Unaccompanied Migrant Children
Most Rev. Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati
July 28, 2014

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A tragic humanitarian crisis has emerged on our own nation's border. By the end of September, 90,000 unaccompanied children are expected to have migrated from Central America to seek safety here. While some may claim that the children are coming to receive immigration benefits, the U.S. Catholic Church, among many others, are asserting that the majority of children are fleeing persecution from organized crime networks in their countries. 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. As the Body of Christ made of many members, our Church knows this well from those who have long served the poor and vulnerable in Central America, from the dioceses and ministries responding to the influx on our nation's border, and from those of us in the Archdiocese who personally know of innocent boys and girls victimized, sold into sex trafficking, and brutally killed. Under such circumstances, children and their parents face a stark choice: Stay and become a likely victim of violence or make a dangerous journey of thousands of miles to a place of possible safety. This is why the Church is declaring this a humanitarian crisis, requiring a response similar to that which we have for refugees rather than that for regular immigrants.

These tens of thousands of unaccompanied children represent a humanitarian crisis measuring our nation's moral character. Communities across the United States are stepping forward to say that they can temporarily house these children while they are placed with family members here, given an opportunity to process their claims, or returned to their countries of origin. As far as we are aware, there have been no clear commitments yet that any large groups of children are arriving to our area. However, it is a possibility, and the Catholic community must stand ready to assist. Here in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, charitable agencies, including Catholic Charities Southwestern Ohio, have expressed a commitment to help.

So today, I encourage us to prepare our hearts should we be called to serve the Lord in this way. I am asking all in our faith community for compassion for these children, prayers for their well-being, and a willingness to respond if needed.

Despite all of the messy, political aspects of this situation, our response as Christians is fairly straight-forward. While the children are here, even if temporarily, we must care for and protect them. Our Holy Father Francis and the U.S. bishops have strongly reinforced this, and the Gospel's mandate to love the most poor and vulnerable tells us that this is a faithful response, not a political one. The long-term solution to this crisis will require a repaired immigration system, more robust development efforts in the nations South of our border, and a bolder commitment to our relationship with them. Yet, for now, the more urgent matter is opening our hearts to homeless children.

Catholic Charities USA is already responding to the humanitarian needs of these children on the border. Should any of these children be temporarily placed within the Archdiocese, any volunteer opportunities to support these children materially, emotionally, and spiritually while their legal proceedings or relocation is in process will need to be coordinated with the local agencies involved. We will make announcements at that time. Please be assured that U.S. and human service agencies handling these children are required to give them a well-child exam, mental health exam, tuberculosis screening, and all needed childhood vaccinations to protect against communicable diseases.

For your information, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared a thorough “Unaccompanied Migrant Children Resource Kit.” In relation to this crisis, it offers a message from Pope Francis, wisdom from Catholic Social Teaching, an in-depth backgrounder on the situation itself, advice on how to support these children, and more. I am encouraging our parishes to utilize these resources to help educate parishioners about why Catholics are so involved in this critical issue.

I am grateful to everyone who, through prayer, solidarity and action, chooses to be Christ to any of these children during one of their loneliest hours.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati