

National Faith and Justice Council

Concerning Immigration Enforcement, Human Dignity, and the Lessons of American History

October 2026

As religious leaders representing the diverse faith traditions and communities of metropolitan Chicago, we come together at a moment of profound concern for the moral direction of our nation.

We are deeply troubled by the current administration's immigration enforcement policies, particularly the expansion of mass deportation efforts, the involvement of military personnel, the treatment of immigrant families, and the increasingly hostile rhetoric used to characterize those who have come to America seeking safety, opportunity, and a better life.

We recognize that the United States has both the authority and responsibility to establish immigration laws, protect its borders, and maintain national security. However, the authority to enforce the law does not absolve government of its responsibility to exercise that authority with justice, compassion, restraint, and respect for human dignity.

Our concern extends beyond immigration policy itself. It reaches into the moral character of our nation and the question of what kind of society we are becoming.

The Lessons of American History

America has experienced periods when governmental authority, military power, and the rhetoric of national protection were used to justify policies that history would ultimately recognize as profound moral failures.

One such period occurred during the administration of President Andrew Jackson.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 established the foundation for the forced displacement of Native American nations from their ancestral homelands. During the years that followed, federal authority and military force were used to remove Indigenous families and communities, culminating in the tragedy remembered as the Trail of Tears.

Thousands suffered and died as families were uprooted, communities were destroyed, and human lives were subordinated to governmental objectives.

We recognize that the forced removal of sovereign Indigenous nations from their ancestral lands is historically and legally distinct from contemporary immigration enforcement.

Nevertheless, the Trail of Tears offers an enduring warning about the consequences of governmental power exercised without sufficient moral restraint.

The lesson of history is that a policy does not become morally righteous simply because it has been authorized by government, justified in the name of national security, or carried out through the power of the state.

We are particularly concerned that aspects of today's immigration enforcement policies reflect troubling patterns from our nation's past: the characterization of entire populations as threats, the increasing involvement of military power in civilian matters, the forced displacement of families, and the normalization of human suffering as an acceptable consequence of national policy.

America must learn from its history rather than risk repeating its moral failures.

The Dangerous Consequences of Dehumanizing Rhetoric

Words matter.

The language used by those entrusted with governmental authority shapes how a nation understands its responsibilities toward others.

When immigrants are repeatedly characterized as invaders, criminals, or threats to the nation's existence, the distinction between individual wrongdoing and collective condemnation becomes dangerously blurred.

Such rhetoric risks creating a social environment in which fear replaces understanding, suspicion replaces compassion, and human suffering becomes increasingly acceptable.

We reject the suggestion that immigration status determines human worth.

We reject the characterization of entire communities through the actions of a few.

And we reject the normalization of language that diminishes the humanity of individuals and families.

A person's immigration status may determine certain legal rights and obligations, but it does not determine that person's human dignity.

The Militarization of Immigration Enforcement

We are equally concerned about the expanding role of military personnel and military resources in immigration enforcement.

Our nation has historically maintained important distinctions between military authority and civilian law enforcement.

Those distinctions deserve careful protection.

The presence of military power in matters affecting civilian populations must never become a substitute for due process, constitutional protections, judicial accountability, or humane treatment.

We call upon our national leadership to exercise restraint and to ensure that immigration enforcement remains consistent with the constitutional principles and moral obligations of a democratic society.

The ability of government to deploy overwhelming force does not establish the wisdom or righteousness of doing so.

Governmental power must always be accompanied by governmental accountability.

The Moral Responsibility of a Nation

Our diverse religious traditions share a fundamental understanding that human life possesses inherent dignity and that societies have a moral responsibility toward the vulnerable, the stranger, the oppressed, and those without power.

We believe that the moral character of a nation is revealed not only in how it treats those who possess citizenship, wealth, and influence, but also in how it treats those who are vulnerable to its authority.

Families should not be subjected to unnecessary separation.

Children should not be made instruments of political or governmental objectives.

Individuals should not be deprived of meaningful legal protections.

Communities should not be made to live under an atmosphere of indiscriminate fear.

And no person should be stripped of human dignity because of nationality, ethnicity, or immigration status.

Justice and compassion are not competing responsibilities.

They are complementary obligations of a morally responsible society.

Our Collective Moral Appeal

As members of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, we therefore express our collective opposition to immigration enforcement policies and practices that compromise human dignity, undermine due process, unnecessarily separate families, or employ military power in ways inconsistent with constitutional protections and civilian accountability.

We call upon the President, Congress, and those responsible for implementing immigration policy to:

1. **Reject dehumanizing rhetoric** that portrays immigrant populations collectively as enemies, invaders, or threats to American society.
2. **Reconsider mass deportation practices** that fail to adequately distinguish between individuals who pose genuine threats to public safety and those who have established families, employment, and longstanding relationships within American communities.
3. **Protect the integrity of families**, particularly children and other vulnerable individuals, throughout immigration enforcement proceedings.
4. **Preserve constitutional protections and due process**, ensuring that individuals have meaningful opportunities to exercise the legal rights available to them.
5. **Limit the use of military power in civilian immigration enforcement**, maintaining appropriate constitutional safeguards, transparency, and accountability.
6. **Pursue immigration reforms** that balance legitimate national security interests with humanitarian responsibilities and respect for the dignity of every person.

A Call to America's Moral Conscience

Our nation stands at a consequential moment.

The history of the Trail of Tears reminds us that the exercise of governmental power can produce consequences that future generations will struggle to comprehend or forgive.

The history of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial segregation further reminds us that injustice can become normalized when society accepts the diminished humanity of particular populations.

These histories are not identical to contemporary immigration enforcement. But they teach a common lesson when fear, prejudice, and governmental authority become more influential than justice and human dignity, the moral conscience of a nation is endangered.

Religious leaders cannot remain indifferent when policies and practices raise such fundamental moral questions.

Our responsibility is not to determine immigration policy on behalf of government. Our responsibility is to remind government that its authority is never greater than its obligation to uphold justice and respect human dignity.

We therefore call upon people of faith, civic institutions, elected officials, and all Americans of conscience to reject the normalization of cruelty and to insist that our nation administer its laws without abandoning its humanity.

We can protect our borders without abandoning compassion.

We can enforce our laws without diminishing human dignity.

We can maintain national security without sacrificing our moral conscience.

And we can disagree about immigration policy without surrendering our shared responsibility to one another as human beings.

History will judge this period not only by the laws we enacted or the policies we enforced, but also by how we treated those most vulnerable to our power.

May we be remembered as a nation that learned from its history rather than repeated its mistakes.

The National Council of Religious Leaders