



## Committee on Migration

c/o Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB

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July 25, 2017

House Committee on the Judiciary  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Conyers:

I write on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration (USCCB/COM) to urge you to oppose H.R. 391, the "Asylum Reform and Border Protection Act of 2017," which is scheduled for markup in your committee this Wednesday, July 26, 2017. Our committee is deeply concerned that the changes proposed by this bill would undermine the ability of persecuted individuals to access protection in the United States.

The Catholic Church has a significant interest in the protection of asylum seekers and has long been involved in welcoming immigrants and refugees to our nation. The Catholic Church's work in assisting vulnerable migrants stems from the belief that every person is created in God's image and should be treated with compassion and dignity. While the Catholic Church recognizes the governments' sovereign right to control its borders, we believe this right must be balanced with the rights of migrants to access safety and protection.

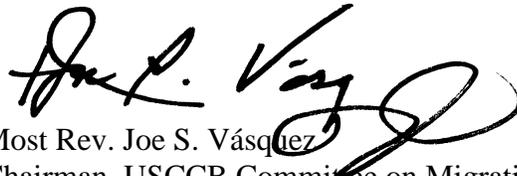
H.R. 391 unacceptably limits protection for vulnerable migrants fleeing persecution. Among its many concerning provisions, the bill essentially prohibits victims of gang violence from accessing asylum. This would leave numerous Central American women and children at risk of abuse, violence, and even death. Through our network of service providers for unaccompanied children, as well as through our ministry, we see firsthand the terrible situations that vulnerable women and children are forced to flee, including active gang recruitment, acts of violence and threats of death. These individuals are the victims of the transnational organized criminal groups that we as a country are trying to eradicate. How we respond to individuals and families seeking protection is a test of our moral character. In the words of Pope Francis, we must "not tire of courageously living the Gospel, which calls you to recognize and welcome the Lord Jesus among the smallest and most vulnerable."

H.R. 391 greatly expands the "firm resettlement" bar to asylum, allowing a person's application to be rejected simply because he or she could live in another country without fear of persecution, regardless of the person's legal status in that country. In doing so, it turns a blind eye to restrictions on the ability of individuals to legally work, access education, or secure legal permanency in such countries – in essence, to seek a dignified life free of persecution.

Furthermore, H.R. 391 restricts access to justice by prohibiting government funds from being used to provide legal counsel to immigrants. Currently, the government does not provide counsel for immigrants in removal proceedings, except for a few particularly vulnerable individuals, such as certain unaccompanied children and individuals with mental disabilities. We believe that children and those with diminished mental capacity should never have to go before an immigration judge without the assistance of a legal representative. Providing counsel to such individuals is not only just and merciful, and necessary for fair proceedings, it is also vital for judicial efficiency.

We ask you to reject H.R. 391 and, instead, seek meaningful and holistic solutions to our regional crisis. We call on Congress to: address the root causes that compel migrants to leave their homes; strengthen avenues to international protection; develop humane and safe repatriation programs; better fund immigration courts and counsel programs for the vulnerable; and continue to offer safety to those fleeing persecution. Instead of undermining the ability of vulnerable people to access protection in our country, my brother bishops and I seek to work with Congress to put forth compassionate and common sense reform. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe S. Vásquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Most Rev. Joe S. Vásquez  
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Migration