



Written Testimony of

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for

House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security Hearing

““Oversight of the United States Refugee Admissions Program”

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“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.””

--Pope Francis, Message for the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees<sup>1</sup>

Thank you Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Lofgren and members of the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security for the opportunity to submit this written testimony regarding the U.S. refugee admissions program (USRAP). USRAP has an important and distinct role within the comprehensive protection framework that the U.S. government established through bi-partisan action over the last 40 years to address U.S. humanitarian and strategic concerns.

As Executive Director of Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB/MRS), in the spirit of the recent quote above from Pope Francis, we urge the U.S. government, in collaboration with civil society, including the faith-based community, to assert its traditional, strong moral and humanitarian international leadership -- a reflection of American values and global strategic interests -- in all phases and parts of the refugee protection system.

## **I. Recommendations.**

After detailing why the Catholic Church is concerned about refugees, we will provide context and rationale to this oversight committee concerning the following recommendations that we urge Congress to pursue:

- urge the President to increase the Presidential Determination from an all-time low of 45,000 refugee admissions in FY2018 to at least 75,000 in FY2019;
- maintain funding at levels at least as high as those from FY2016 and FY2017, for refugee related appropriations of State and Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPs), namely, Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA); and for Labor Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Programs (LHHS), namely, Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) and International Labor Affairs Bureau (ILAB);

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees, January 14, 2018,” Vatican, released August 15, 2017, available at [https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B\\_Kt1KnvReQMqMnrZnpONXBnT0k&usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B_Kt1KnvReQMqMnrZnpONXBnT0k&usp=sharing)

- maintain overall commitment to keep strong each component of the refugee protection system, such as resettlement, and asylum, and make optimum use of them all;
- avoid an “assimilation screen-out test” that risks becoming a mask for discrimination that violates American principles of equality for all and freedom of religion, rather continue vigorous efforts to help improve newcomers’ ability to integrate and contribute to their new U.S. communities.

## **II. The Catholic Church has deep concern for refugees and migrants.**

The Catholic Church has a long history of solidarity, pastoral care, community outreach, service, and advocacy related to people migrating to the United States. Migration and Refugee Services of the USCCB (USCCB/MRS) is the largest U.S. refugee resettlement agency, welcoming and helping to integrate refugees, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion. Working in partnership with the U.S. government, state and local governments, and local communities, it has resettled over one million of the three million refugees who have come to our country since 1975. It also serves as a national leader in caring for unaccompanied refugee and migrant children and victims of human trafficking. USCCB/MRS works through 80 Catholic Dioceses and Archdioceses and their Catholic Charities agencies in some 100 offices and sub-offices in 37 states across the country to welcome and serve refugees, unaccompanied alien children, and victims of human trafficking.

The Catholic Church’s solidarity and service related to migrants stems from the belief that every human being is created in God’s image, and from the Church’s experience that this is often forgotten in the cases of migrants and refugees who are frequently marginalized and mistreated. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the Catholic Church’s commitment to care for pilgrims, aliens, exiles, refugees, and migrants of every kind, affirming that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, we advocate to address the root causes for such poor conditions while also protecting those forced to migrate. In our joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration*, January 23, 2003, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops call for nations to work toward a “globalization of solidarity.” In that document, we affirm that “Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community.” No. 99. We likewise stated that “because of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care.” No. 82. And we state that refugees should “have access to appropriate due process protections consistent with international law.” No. 99. Also, we stated that “[b]ecause of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care.” No. 82.

When Pope Francis traveled to Lampedusa, Italy, he defended the rights of refugees and migrants and called for their protection. He decried the “globalization of indifference” and the “throwaway culture” that disregards those fleeing persecution in order to seek a better life. Pope Francis also created a Vatican department, the Dicastery to Promote Integral Human Development, to be a catalyst for Catholic collaboration in developing policies and systems to effectively address refugee and migration crises. He is personally overseeing the Migration & Refugee Section of that Dicastery as the Church seeks to improve the welcome, protection, promotion, and integration of refugees and immigrants.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of Migrants), September, 1952.

### III. Context and rationale for recommendations.

#### A. FY2018's Presidential Determination leaves behind the most vulnerable reducing our annual ceiling to admit and resettle only 45,000 refugees for FY2018.

This is a time of unprecedented forced displacement of over 65 million people displaced globally, with over 22 million of them being refugees who have fled to other countries.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 84% of refugees have fled to host countries that have developing economies.<sup>4</sup> This often translates into underdeveloped refugee and child protection systems that often leave the most vulnerable refugees at great risk.

In FY2016, UNHCR identified that over 1.1 million of the 22 million refugees needed access to third country resettlement,<sup>5</sup> yet given current global capacity UNHCR referred only 162,500 refugees for resettlement, and 125,800 actually travelled.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the number of refugees actually resettled amounted to less than 1% of the overall number of world refugees.

Indeed, refugee resettlement is most often reserved for the most vulnerable. These are people like religious or ethnic or social minorities who are as unsafe in the neighboring host country as they were in their home country. It includes unaccompanied children in child-headed households, women at risk, victims of torture and human trafficking, and the elderly. Often for individuals with these profiles, the refugee host country is not a place where they can safely build a new life, even temporarily. In the U.S., given our commitment to the importance of family, our resettlement program also facilitates unification of refugees with family already in the United States.

While urging the Administration to use every one of the 45,000 designated admission slots in FY2018, we also urge that the Administration build admissions back up to the 75,000 level for FY2019. Likewise, to ensure U.S. leadership capacity to respond to the global crisis, we urge Congress to maintain appropriations to at least FY2016 and FY2017 levels for State and Foreign Operations, and related Programs, particularly for MRA, IDA, and ERMA; and to do the same with Labor, Health, and Human Services, particularly for REA and ILAB.

Given the growing global forced displacement crisis, continuing robust funding for the four international accounts most closely related to the crises provides for both overseas assistance and admissions processing for refugees (MRA); supports forced internal displacement situations to keep crises from leading to catastrophes and forced international migration (IDA); supports addressing humanitarian emergencies such as famine that is currently prevalent in Africa (ERMA); and provides community prevention work with youth in places like Central America to help them have alternatives to dangerous migration and human trafficking (ILAB). It is crucial to maintain FY2016/FY2017 levels of funding to meet the ongoing work of local U.S. communities welcoming not only refugees but others suffering from the global displacement crisis—such as asylum seekers,

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, May 2017, page 2, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> *Global Resettlement Needs, 2016*, UNHCR, June 2015, page 10, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/resettlement/558019729/unhcr-projected-global-resettlement-needs-2016.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Global Resettlement Needs, 2018*, UNHCR, June 2017, page 10, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/resettlement/593a88f27/unhcr-projected-global-resettlement-needs-2018.html>

Cubans and Haitians, unaccompanied children, survivors of torture, and victims of human trafficking.

**B. The lowest PD on record also reduces the U.S. humanitarian/strategic capacity to leverage U.S. resettlement to incentivize other nations to step forward with their own humanitarian efforts. The low PD also reduces U.S. capacity to stabilize protracted or emerging refugee situations, or to show solidarity with host countries that are strategic U.S. allies.**

Over recent administrations, with both Republican and Democratic presidents, the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration of the Department of State (DOS/PRM) worked with UNHCR to expand the number of nations participating in the refugee resettlement program to 30 nations,<sup>7</sup> growing the worldwide program not only in total numbers of refugees served but in countries open to welcome refugees. The U.S. and civil society partners provided mentorship and helped nurture the new programs. As these new programs are beginning to gain strength, the United States is suddenly moving in the opposite direction, drastically cutting back on resettlement. The Catholic Bishops fear that other nations will follow suit and that even more vulnerable refugees will be left behind.

The hopefully temporary reduction in U.S. leadership also comes at a time when there are several world crises which have large components of forced migration, including in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. Reducing our leadership role in these situations potentially leaves a vacuum with not only negative humanitarian consequences but also negative strategic consequences.

In Africa, for example, the U.S. has played a key responsibility-sharing role through resettlement for the many refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as neighboring countries have hosted the vast majority of refugees. The largest African refugee resettlement population includes those fleeing from DRC, and most of them are Christians fleeing ethnic and religious persecution. Also in Africa, large famines have emerged, which in past years have been responded to through ERMA. With the U.S. reduction in leadership for FY2018, the resettlement numbers have been cut almost in half, from a regional PD in FY2017 of 35,000 to a FY2018 one of 19,000.<sup>8</sup> On the famine issue, contrary to past practice of having ERMA funds available for such emergencies, the Administration is urging ERMA be zeroed out for FY2018.

In the Middle East, the Administration is slashing the regional PD from 35,555 to 17,500.<sup>9</sup> This reduction in responsibility-sharing comes at a time when Lebanon is hosting over one million refugees, Turkey over 3 million, and Germany over 1 million. This leaves us deeply concerned about whether the United States is carrying its fair share for the sake of the international common good. On the humanitarian level, many Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities fleeing from Syria and Iraq will lose access to life saving resettlement. Also, we are deeply concerned about the tens of thousands of Iraqis who are in danger because they served side-by-side with our troops, and

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<sup>7</sup> Id., page 78.

<sup>8</sup> Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2018 Report to Congress*, September 30, 2017, page 6, available at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4063604-Report-to-Congress-Proposed-Refugee-Admissions.html>

<sup>9</sup> Id.

because their rescue and protection will be delayed because of a slash in the U.S. refugee admissions program.

In Asia, the admissions program is being slashed from a regional PD of 12,518 in FY2017 to 5,000 in FY 2018.<sup>10</sup> This is at a time when almost 600,000 Rohingya, a Muslim religious minority from Rakhine State, Burma, have fled to Bangladesh in just a two-month period.<sup>11</sup> Besides these forcibly displaced people, there are several hundred thousand refugees from Burma in Thailand, Malaysia, India, and elsewhere in the region. Historically, most of them have been Christians who fled religious and ethnic persecution by the Burma military. Some of those Christians, such as Kachins, continue to flee active persecution by the Burma military in their state. They join the Rohingya as among the most vulnerable, with some of them in need of U.S. resettlement protection from imminent persecution. Besides the Rohingya challenge, the other dynamic in the Burma situation is the democratically elected government's push for peace process negotiations, known as the Panglong process, that could ultimately address the protracted regional forced displacement issue of the many other ethnic minorities in Burma. Together with ethnic minority leaders and with the international community, the Burma government is working to lay the groundwork for pursuing durable solutions of voluntary, safe, and humane repatriation, local integration in the neighboring host countries, and third country resettlement for those for whom it would be appropriate—such as refugees whose current risks or past trauma make it unsafe or inhumane to return them to Burma, or those who need to unite with families in resettlement countries. At this critical stage of resolving protracted forced displacement situations, there is often the strategic use of resettlement, whereby the United States comes forward with its resettlement role while encouraging other nations to step forward with other responsibility sharing. If the United States government continues to dramatically reduce regional admissions, it risks losing resettlement as an important diplomatic, humanitarian tool at a crucial time.

In Latin America, the U.S. is reducing the regional PD from 5,000 to 1,500.<sup>12</sup> This occurs at a time when many youth and their families are finding themselves at risk of physical harm and death. The Catholic Church itself has suffered from this ongoing violence. In a recent visit by USCCB staff with the Most Reverend José Luis Escobar Alas, Archbishop of San Salvador, he shared his recent pastoral letter, "I See Violence and Strife in the City."<sup>13</sup> He describes one parish alone that in one year was "exposed to murder, persecution, exodus, and extortion," including the murder of six active parishioners by stabbing, dismemberment or firearms.<sup>14</sup> Near the end of the pastoral, he expresses to Salvadoran migrants "my closeness and full support in this terrible Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) that you must live in your exodus, risking all kinds of violations of your human rights, and our full support to demand that your rights are respected and that you always receive the dignified treatment you deserve."<sup>15</sup> Besides the ongoing flight of people from northern Central America, there is a large emerging forced displacement of Venezuelans, given the recent political changes in that country. Indeed, they have become one of the leading sending countries for asylum seekers to the United States.

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<sup>10</sup> Id.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, "Bangladesh Rohingya Emergency," available at <https://donate.unhcr.org/int-en/rohingya>

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas, "Pastoral Letter: I See Violence and Strife in the City," Archdiocese of San Salvador, March 24, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Id., at page 15.

<sup>15</sup> Id., at page 111.

### **C. The lowest PD on record reduces the economic and social benefits that communities have come to rely on from the admission and resettlement of new refugees.**

U.S. refugees include Albert Einstein (scientist), Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright (secretaries of state), Sergey Brin (Google co-founder), and many other famous contributors to U.S. society. We point to one recent study<sup>16</sup> that illustrates the profound, positive economic impact of refugees collectively. Refugees:

- earn \$77.2 billion and pay taxes of \$20.9 billion, annually (in 2015);
- earn initial median household wages of \$22,000 per year, after 25 years, average earnings are \$67,000;
- earn as entrepreneurs \$4.6 billion annually, as 13% of refugees start their own businesses;
- share collective spending power of over \$1 billion in each of 18 U.S. states for a total of \$57.4 billion, including \$17.2 billion in California and \$4.6 billion in Texas; and
- provide part of the solution for future tax support to address the aging of America as 49.7% of U.S. born people are of working age, while 77.1% of refugees are of working age.

As can be seen by the results of this and other reports (see RCUSA website), refugees contribute greatly to U.S. society and local communities. Of course, there is ongoing learning by the government and the resettlement agencies about how to optimally integrate people into U.S. society, particularly when new populations of refugees are approved for resettlement.

We are deeply concerned about a discussion by some in the Administration that there should be an “assimilation test” applied to refugees to screen them out of U.S. admissions based on negative assimilation qualities. Given the diversity of American communities who have come to share common American values and aspirations, an effort to screen out people based on assimilation factors risks discriminating against people based on race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. On the other hand, we are continually committed to working with newly arrived refugees to find the best ways to help integrate them, positioning them to be able to support themselves and their families, and to contribute to the common good in their new American communities.

### **D. America can resettle refugees and adjudicate asylum cases simultaneously.**

We do not believe that it is necessary to reduce resettlement in order to address the asylum backlog. Resettlement, such as the soon to be dismantled Central American Minor resettlement program, is established to give refugees, in this case refugee youth, an alternative to dangerous migration. Instead of having to journey to the United States to seek asylum, they can receive resettlement and avoid the worst dangers of further persecution or being victimized by criminals or human traffickers. Providing that alternative for some of the Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring South American countries represents another example where establishing resettlement may create a safe pathway and actually reduce the number of asylum seekers coming to the United States. Congress should fund sufficient asylum officers and immigration judges to meet the ongoing demands of asylum seekers applying to our system, and sufficient refugee corps members to maintain the annual admissions number of 75,000. If the immigration fees that generally cover these adjudicators are insufficient, then Congress should appropriate additional funding to cover them.

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<sup>16</sup> *From Struggle to Resilience*, New American Economy, June 2017, p. 2, available at RCUSA website link (see footnote 4).

Moreover, rather than creating competition between different components of international protection, it would be better to make judicious use of all elements. In a clear example of how the components are interrelated, if DHS extends TPS, it will continue to provide status for an estimated 200,000 Salvadorans and 57,000 Hondurans. If it terminates TPS, given current conditions in those two countries, many of current TPS recipients may apply for asylum; others may return, run into danger there and then flee again and request asylum at a later date. Other important mechanisms include removing the root causes of forced migration, and providing, where appropriate, complementary forms of protection for unaccompanied children, victims of human trafficking, and individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, and elsewhere who fear for their lives and seek to remain in the United States without an extension of TPS.

#### **IV. Conclusion.**

Thank you for the opportunity to share our analysis. We respectfully urge the Subcommittee to pursue these recommendations.