



HOMILY: Mass for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 'We Pass On By'

Given by Robert Cardinal McElroy, Archbishop of Washington
Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Washington, DC
Sunday, September 27, 2026

(The following is the text of the homily by Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, the archbishop of Washington, at a Mass on Sept. 27, 2026, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington for the 112th World Day of Migrants and Refugees.)

For us as Americans two great legacies form the call that falls upon us regarding the immigrant and the stranger in our midst.

The first of these is a religious call that comes from today's first reading from the *Book of Deuteronomy*. Moses calls the people of Israel to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt, strangers in the land, homeless, victimized and outcasts. Moses instructs Israel to always keep this history at the forefront of their consciousness and let it fashion their most fundamental attitudes and actions toward the stranger and the alien, the widow and the orphan who might seek a home among the people of God. The dictum of Moses is clear and piercing: "You shall not violate the rights of the alien or of the orphan, nor take the clothing of a widow as a pledge... When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf there; you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the alien, the orphan and the widow." This mandate suffuses the spirituality of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the moral traditions of virtually every faith in the United States.

The second legacy that we as Americans enjoy is a reverence for immigration, which has built us up into the great nation that we love so deeply. It was not people of great wealth who came to our shores, but the poor and the dispossessed, those seeking freedom from oppression and opportunities to build new lives in this new land. In the words emblazoned on the Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus wrote that Lady Liberty cries out with silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free... Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me." There was a time when these words brought tears to every American. Now they are shunned, riddled with conditions, or ignored altogether because they remind us of what we have become.

In the past eighteen months our nation has cast aside both the spiritual and moral tradition of the *Book of Deuteronomy* and the centerpiece of American culture that our love of immigration and immigrants constitutes. They have been replaced by suspicion, division, cruelty and violence.

One of my Scripture professors in the seminary taught us that when you examine a parable of Jesus, look for the character you most dislike and that is you. In today's Gospel reading from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it is all too easy to find the figures we ~~most~~ dislike: the priest and the Levite who saw the victim lying by the side of the road and crossed to the other side to pass on. The parable is clear: both the priest and the Levite witnessed the suffering and pain of the robbers' victim. They recognized what was happening; they heard the call of pain; they moved carefully to the other side in order to insulate themselves from having to take any action. They simply passed on by.

For the last year and a half, the people of the United States have witnessed the suffering of the undocumented in our midst, purposely and strategically magnified by our government, and for the most part, we have simply passed on by.

At the beginning of 2025, when we were told that ICE enforcement efforts would be confined to securing the border and deporting those who had committed serious crimes, we told ourselves that this is acceptable. After all, Catholic teaching itself says that a nation has a right to secure its borders and deport serious criminals among the undocumented in our midst.

But then we witnessed the indiscriminate raids on farmworkers and Home Depot parking lots, nursing homes and schools, and we recognized that this was a war on every undocumented immigrant in our land, including those who had been here for decades and contributed enormously to the economy and culture of our nation.

We saw their suffering and the injustice of it, but we just crossed to the other side of the road and passed on by.

When the expansiveness of the net of deportation began to touch us more intimately, ensnaring mothers and fathers and children and families whom we knew, fellow parishioners and coworkers who exemplify all the best qualities that our nation is so desperately searching for, we were deeply troubled. But in the end we told ourselves that I cannot save them alone. And emotionally we crossed to the other side of the road and passed on by.

When our government laid siege to the city of Minneapolis with wanton violence and the killing of those who had spoken up in resistance, we were outraged. We could not believe that the mask had become the new symbol of American justice. We said it is unacceptable for our government, in our name, to send poorly trained troops *en masse* into the streets of our cities to crush the growing opposition to the wholesale war on so many innocent people. But in the end the American people saw the suffering, crossed to the other side of the road, and passed on by.

We have been told for over a year that the reason the federal government is expelling immigrants is that they broke the law by entering or staying in the United States. In recent months the government has shown us how hollow that claim is. More than one million immigrants who came to the United States for asylum or as refugees under the TPS program were legally admitted here because of the danger that a return to their homeland would pose for them. Now, our government has decided that these endangered immigrants will be deported from The United States and returned to danger in their homeland. These refugees never broke any law. They are being deported because of a general desire to exclude immigrants from American society. They are being deported because the bigotry that has often tarnished American immigrant history is rampant once again in our nation. We know this, but so often we cross the road to the other side and pass on by.

In January, five-year-old Liam Ramos was arrested by ICE officers. Dressed in his Spider-Man outfit and wearing a blue bunny hat, totally bewildered, he was brought by agents to his home, as his school said, to use him as bait to get his mother to answer the door and be investigated for deportation. Taken to a detention center in Texas along with his father, he was imprisoned for a month until an outraged federal judge ordered him to be released. In the release documents, the judge included pictures of Liam alongside two verses from the Gospel: the first was “Let the little children come unto me and do not hinder them, for it is to just such as these that the Kingdom belongs.” The second verse was brief in the Judge’s order: “Jesus wept.”

Jesus weeps all across our nation for the children who have been arrested, detained, transported to far-off centers with terrible living conditions, and cut off from their families.

For us as a nation we can pass by no more. We must stop, recognize the evil that is being carried out in our name, and fight every dimension of it. We must seek to convert our political representatives from tolerating this evil or replace them. We must shed our identities as priests and Levites and become like the Good Samaritan who recognized no boundaries in rescuing the victim by the side of the road. We must recognize that in abandoning the words of *Deuteronomy* and the Statue of Liberty we are losing our soul as a nation. And we must constantly see before us the families that are being broken apart, the fear that consumes the undocumented communities, the children who are in pain. We must act now and act together. For Jesus weeps, and he will continue to weep until we go to the side of the road, lift up the victim, embrace him and make his pain our own.



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