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A U.S. Border Patrol truck drives along the border fence with Mexico and passes the Cristo Rey Statue on Mount Cristo in Sunland Park, New Mexico, June 18.
(CNS/Reuters/Mike Blake)



by Phyllis Zagano

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In case you missed it, Steve Bannon, the voice of the alt-right, says migration is Pope Francis' fault. You know, all this business about taking care of the poor and homeless, the people displaced by war or poverty, the ones looking for a stable life away from their cherished homelands.

[According to Bannon](#), "The pope more than anybody else has driven the migrant crisis in Europe, that's why you have a new government in Italy."

Then you have U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions [quoting Scripture](#) to justify separating the families of illegal immigrants, putting them in separate cages, and "disappearing" the children. At least that [seems to be ending](#).

Where to begin?

The worldwide situation is complex, but all things being equal, I might rather be in a U.S. detention center in Texas than a migrant camp in South Sudan or Myanmar, or on a rogue ship denied port landing in Italy. At least members of the U.S. Congress, the media, and even a Catholic bishop or three may stop by to see what's going on in Texas. Yes, there, immigrants who have entered the U.S. illegally sit on the floor in large (air-conditioned) caged-in areas. Yes, those guilty of criminal offenses (especially illegal border crossing) are separated from their children. Everybody gets two hot meals daily and a chance to shower every other day.

But they were breaking up families — and defending it! White House officials called it a deterrent; Homeland Security said it stopped child trafficking.

It is still worse than horrendous. I still worry about the children. I still worry about the parents. Mostly, I worry about the moral fabric of the country.

The United States is just one of multiple nations with packed refugee camps. Eruptions of poverty and crime send people on the move. They walk, they swim, they ride the seas in all sorts of vessels for a chance at freedom.

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More people are displaced within their own borders. [In Syria](#), since 2011, when the government tried to squelch civil protests, the three-sided war (government, rebels, Kurds) has displaced more than half the country's population. Some are [internal refugees](#), still within Syria, and many are now stateless immigrants.

Meanwhile, five of the world's most powerful armies (Israeli, American, Russian, Turkish and Iranian) fly over or march around a country smaller than Nebraska. So far, half a million Syrians are dead and more than a million injured. For the now and future maimed and ill, apparently only half the country's public hospitals and three Catholic hospitals remain in business.

No matter what country, it is near impossible to pick apart the tangled strands of discontent and division. Ethnic battles, corrupt governments, fiscal collapse, famine, drought and outright war cook a noxious stew. Emigration is the only answer. It happened before; it happens today. Pick a country, any country, and you will find a present or a past with people coming, people leaving, people internally displaced from ancestral lands or new-built homes.



Pope Francis meets Rohingya refugees from Myanmar during an interreligious and ecumenical meeting for peace in the garden of the archbishop's residence in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Dec. 1, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)

And this is the pope's fault? People are frightened, starving, poor and homeless because the pope is teaching the Gospel, even as U.S. officials quote Scripture to justify their actions?

Give me a break.

The current U.S. policy — no matter what poet Emma Lazarus wrote about the Statue of Liberty — is to bar entry to the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

"Build the wall"? How about build some houses with that money? How about buy up the desperate neighborhoods of Detroit and give them to those desperate folks from Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and the rest? Or how about redoing an abandoned town? You can buy [Cerro Gordo in California](#) (22 buildings, 300 acres) for under a million dollars. Offer it to a planeload of refugees from anywhere, and give them another million in startup funds. Why spend taxpayer's money to keep people out of a country built by immigrants?

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I am tired of the photos and the stories about how the U.S. is securing its borders from women and 8-year-olds. I am tired of hearing about Rohingya refugees and the people of Syria. I am tired of new calls for nationalism arising from the alt-right around the world.

I am especially tired of pundits and politicians using religion to either justify or blame people caught in untenable situations. That is a different kind of warfare, and it simply must stop. The Gospel is the answer, not the cause.

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Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, Just Catholic, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert sign-up](#).

This story appears in the **Families Separated at the Border** feature series. [View the full series](#).

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