



## FRANCISCAN FRIARS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

COMMISSION ON JUSTICE, PEACE & THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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August 15, 2014

Dear Friars,

Greetings of peace and all good!

As many of you are aware, the U.S. and Central America face a massive humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of unaccompanied children seek refuge in the U.S. and other nations. We write today at the direction of our Provincials, who just sent a letter to President Obama asking him to offer more support to these child refugees. The Provincials want us to provide you with resources and avenues for action that build upon their request to the President.

First, it is important to acknowledge the service that so many friars and the communities with whom they serve have provided to the children and others in need. Here is a sample of current efforts:

- On the U.S. Mexico Border—our ministries have been places of comfort and healing in McAllen, Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; and Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico.
- In the Washington, DC area—friars have provided legal assistance to children in their asylum cases as well as compassionate support to them in their trauma.
- Throughout the U.S — several ministries are supporting efforts to provide foster care and reduce the economic burden of doing so, and exploring how to broaden their assistance.
- In the fleeing children's' home countries—friars are working tirelessly to provide safe places where the children might experience hope about their futures.

It is awe inspiring to witness the ways that friars humbly work with their local ministries to live the faith. Building from the work of our communities, our Provincials wrote President Obama requesting that he provide further leadership and direction in this crisis. They made clear that sending anyone, let alone children, back to three of the most violent nations in the world is fundamentally unjust. They encouraged President Obama not to capitulate to the fear mongering that calls for these children to be immediately “sent back,” but instead to ensure that they receive legal due process and representation.

Despite all the efforts to date, more is required if justice is to prevail. We stand inspired by the words of Pope Francis who states, “I exhort all countries to a generous openness (to migrants) which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favour the recognition of others.”

Building on the Holy Father's direction, we specifically invite you to consider doing the following:

- 1) Use whatever means you can to educate yourself and the communities you serve about the *facts* of this crisis. Many erroneously refer to the situation as primarily an immigration “mess,”

ignoring the underlying humanitarian crisis born out of the disintegration of society due to profound violence. We have provided educational resources on the English Speaking Conference website at <http://www.escofm.org/jpic.html> to help you.

- 2) Contact your local Catholic Charities Office and find out what can be done to respond to the immediate needs of unaccompanied child refugees in your area.
- 3) Engage in advocacy and invite the ministries where you serve to do the same. In particular:
  - a. Contact local members of Congress at 1-888-562-8232 and ask them to:
    - i. oppose any attempt to “fast track” the removal of unaccompanied children, without first having their cases heard by an immigration judge on moral grounds. --In many cases, sending the children back is tantamount to a death sentence.
    - ii. provide adequate funding to protect unaccompanied children arriving in the U.S. and respond to their basic needs, including legal representation, while their immigration cases are pending.
    - iii. address the root causes that compel children to flee their homes by providing robust funding for targeted development programs in Central America and Mexico, and comprehensive regional plans to address the issues.

*Please note: On the [www.escofm.org/jpic](http://www.escofm.org/jpic) website, we have provided a link so that you might send emails to your Members of Congress if you do not wish to make phone calls.*

- b. Contact President Obama at 202-456-1111 and request that he:
        - i. not send any children back without first allowing them legal counsel and the opportunity to have their cases heard by an immigration judge.
        - ii. make the resources available for dignified care for these children, including help to treat their trauma.
        - iii. provide Temporary Protected Status to persons fleeing from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

This humanitarian crisis challenges us to “be who we say we are” in caring for those most in need. As our Provinces continue to discern our reorganization as a Franciscan community in the U.S., this collective action will help us to share our common story - a commitment to live out Franciscan values. We are thankful for your service and hope you will find a way to join us in this endeavor to care for the Stranger in our midst.

In the Hope of Peace,

Chris Gaffrey, OFM  
Immaculate Conception

Maury Smith, OFM  
Sacred Heart

Donna Graham, OSF  
St. John the Baptist

Russell Testa,  
Holy Name

Mark Schroeder, OFM  
Saint Barbara and Our Lady of Guadalupe

Jason Welle, OFM  
Assumption, BVM