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## Cultivating Compassion in Catholic Teachings: An Invitation to Relationship with Immigrants and Refugees with HIV/AIDS

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Cultivating Compassion in Catholic Teachings: An Invitation to  
Relationship with Immigrants and Refugees with HIV/AIDS

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A Thesis  
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By  
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**Abstract**

In 1989 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*. This document, which articulates the official Catholic Church teaching on HIV/AIDS, emphasizes personal responsibility in limiting the spread of HIV and calls for compassion toward the sick. The bishops direct their document to Catholic clergy and parishioners and offer recommendations for government policy and parish actions that affirm human dignity. This thesis argues that the document's recommendations do not adequately consider the experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS and neglect sufficient attention to their lived experiences. In future documents, the bishops should use the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS to create recommendations that more effectively nurture compassionate government policies and parish responses. The main reason this is the case is that compassion demands intimacy in each other's lives. In that light, this thesis critiques government policies that fail to reflect the compassionate response that the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS call for. Likewise, it provides recommendations for parish actions that more fully embody God's compassion, inviting us into the intimacy of relationship with immigrants and refugees who live with HIV/AIDS today.

**Keywords:**

USCCB, HIV, AIDS, Immigrant and refugees, Compassion, Responsibility, Lived Experience, Migrant protection protocol

## Introduction

36.3 million people have died from AIDS since 1980.<sup>1</sup> That is almost equivalent to the size of the current total population of California. Since the 1980s, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has decimated populations with its high fatality rate. The tragedy brought about by this disease has inflicted pain and suffering worldwide. Scientists have worked to manage this illness and provide hope once again for the sick. Scientific progress has been miraculous, saving the lives of millions of people. Church leaders, politicians, scientists, and activists have been working to combat the disease, but the battle against HIV/AIDS is far from over. In 2020 alone, 1.5 million new infections occurred and 680,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

HIV-positive immigrants and refugees with HIV are particularly vulnerable. Immigrants and refugees are uprooting their lives, possibly fleeing from persecution, and trying to meet their own basic needs in a new location.<sup>3</sup> Upon arrival to the new country, immigrants and refugees may struggle with limited access to healthcare, lack of social support, and increased HIV-risk behaviors.<sup>4</sup> These factors increase the chance of contracting HIV or causing the infection to progress to AIDS.

The Catholic Church has also been a source of hope for some people affected by HIV/AIDS. In particular, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has provided input into the response against HIV/AIDS. In 1989 the USCCB released a document titled *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* that addressed the HIV crisis in the United

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<sup>1</sup> UNAIDS, “Global HIV & AIDS Statistics - Fact Sheet.” UNAIDS, 2021. <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Ross, Chinazo O Cunningham, and David B Hanna, “HIV Outcomes among Migrants from Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries Living in High-Income Countries: A Review of Recent Evidence,” *Current opinion in infectious diseases*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, accessed May 10, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5750122/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

States. The USCCB was established in 1917 and has been dedicated to addressing social justice issues in the U.S. since.<sup>5</sup> The bishops' mission is to care for immigrants, aid in education, and promote Catholic activity through publications and direct engagement.<sup>6</sup> The USCCB is an authoritative body and their publications are widely respected by parishes throughout the nation.

Returning to the document mentioned above, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* aimed to encourage compassion toward the sick while emphasizing personal and social responsibility to decrease the spread of HIV. The bishops directed this statement to Catholic clergy and parishioners and offered recommendations for government policy and parish actions that affirm human dignity. Considering the USCCB's dedication to care for immigrants, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* significantly lacks recommendations and concern for HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. There are only two sentences in the 34-page document that address special considerations for immigrants and refugees with HIV. This research argues that the document's recommendations do not adequately consider the experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS and neglects sufficient attention to their lived experiences. I will argue that providing more attention to the lived experience of immigrants and refugees will better meet the document's goals of eliciting more compassion and responsibility. I will be focusing on three major sections of the document: "A Call to Social Justice," "A Call to Compassion," and "A Call to Responsibility." Following the original format of *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*, I will also provide concrete action steps for parishes to support HIV-positive immigrants and refugees better. I will conclude by critiquing the Migrant Protection

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<sup>5</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "About USCCB," Accessed May 10. <https://www.usccb.org/about>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Protocol, also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, and the harm it has caused HIV-positive asylum seekers.

I came to this research topic after taking a course at the University of San Diego (USD) titled “HIV/AIDS and Christian Ethics.” As a pre-health student majoring in Theology and Religious Studies, this course integrated my interests in public health and the Catholic Faith. I read the book *Risky Marriage: HIV and Intimate Relationships in Tanzania* by Melissa Browning during the course, which shared the lived experiences of HIV-positive women. I found the author’s methodology of relationship and storytelling to be empowering for the people she wrote about. Browning shared each woman’s experience with reverence and then crafted a compelling argument that challenged Catholic marriage norms. While taking this course on HIV, I was also serving as a USD Health Equity Fellow. During one of the fellowship meetings, a healthcare provider from San Ysidro Health shared information about public health issues along the U.S.-Mexico border. I was shocked to learn that Tijuana, Mexico had the highest volume of HIV cases in the nation. After learning about this fact, I decided to register for a Tijuana Day Trip through University Ministry. We visited Casa Las Memorias, a volunteer-run HIV/AIDS hospice, and spent time with the residents. The conversations I had that day with the residents, volunteers, and other students shifted my perspective on the conditions along the U.S.-Mexico border. I was disturbed that no more than an hour away from my university campus, people were facing severe health problems that were exacerbated by U.S. immigration policies. I spent the next two years taking courses related to these topics, volunteering in different healthcare capacities, and building ideas for my thesis. I am grateful that I could use my Honors thesis experience to research an issue I was passionate about. It helped me develop interdisciplinary knowledge on how to be a compassionate healthcare provider in the future.

## Understanding Christian Ethics

Amidst the suffering and sadness caused by HIV, people looked to the Catholic Church for direction during the height of the epidemic. Communities were looking to the Church not only for support but for ethical insights into a disease some people thought was rooted in immorality. To navigate the HIV/AIDS crisis, the Catholic Church relied on Christian ethics to craft documents such as *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*. According to Christian ethicist Servais Pinckaers, “Christian ethics is the branch of theology that studies human acts to direct them to a loving vision of God seen as our true, complete happiness and our end.”<sup>7</sup> The field of Christian ethics has grown exponentially and continues to evolve to solve new ethical dilemmas in society. Most Christian ethicists utilize the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as the primary source for the field. The four sources that make up the Quadrilateral are scripture, tradition, reason, and lived experience.<sup>8</sup> When these sources collaborate, Christian ethics can successfully work toward developing ethical solutions that promote human dignity and the common good. I will analyze the use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* later in this document, so it is important to explain each source and its contribution to Christian ethics.

The Bible is the central source of Christian ethics. Scripture is essential in Christian ethics for two reasons. First, the Bible is a source of revelation which means that the text reflects the will of God.<sup>9</sup> By reading and interpreting the Bible, Christian ethicists can uncover lessons and virtues that reflect the teachings of Jesus. Christian ethicists can then apply Biblical

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<sup>7</sup> Servais Pinckaers, “What Is Christian Ethics? The Search for a Definition,” in *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1995), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Todd Salzman, “Normative Ethics,” in *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), chpt. “Normative Ethics”.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Allman, “A Crash Course in Christian Ethics,” in *Who Would Jesus Kill?: War, Peace, and the Christian Tradition*, (Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, 2008), 24.

messages to contemporary issues like HIV. The second reason scripture is vital is that stories and parables in the Bible are the primary way Jesus communicates ethical wisdom.<sup>10</sup> Jesus is the model for the proper way of life, and scripture is how we can learn about Christ's ways.

Christian ethicists can interpret scripture in multiple ways, such as a book of laws or a figurative guide to ethical behavior.<sup>11</sup> Scripture can be interpreted in many ways, so this source must be employed thoughtfully. When authorities, such as Bishops, theologians, or ethicists, interpret the Bible for Christian ethics, there is the risk of verses being used out of context to support a preconceived argument. The USCCB heavily relies on scripture in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* to emphasize Christ's teachings on compassion, human dignity, and suffering. The USCCB then applies these Biblical teachings to their ethical response to HIV/AIDS.

Alongside scripture, the source of tradition adds value to Christian ethics as it extends Biblical teachings into the modern world. Christian ethicist Mark Allman explains that tradition is a "set of ethical principles (commitments) that have emerged more or less organically over centuries of heartfelt reflection on how to confront contemporary ethical problems... in a way that is faithful to Scripture and the life and example of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> The Bible does not address HIV, so the Catholic Church discerns principles from the sacred text and then applies them to the struggles of the epidemic. Tradition is authoritative because it encompasses information from "Church fathers, councils, encyclicals, official teachings of the magisterium, and the ongoing theological reflection... with culture, science, and experience."<sup>13</sup> Tradition shapes moral knowledge to pull from when discussing contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 24

<sup>11</sup> Edward LeRoy Long, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Look at Basic Options," *Interpretation* 19, no. 2 (April 1965), 149 and 154.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Allman, "A Crash Course in Christian Ethics," in *Who Would Jesus Kill?: War, Peace, and the Christian Tradition*, (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 2008), 37.

<sup>13</sup> Todd Salzman, "Normative Ethics," in *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), chpt. "Normative Ethics".

A flaw of tradition, seen in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*, is that Church tradition has primarily been formed almost exclusively by men. Women have made fewer contributions because most of the Church leadership is male, mostly excluding women from the conversation. Diversity of gender in creating tradition would lead to more insight because different experiences and perspectives would help form creative solutions. The source of tradition is highly regarded and extensively relied upon in Christian ethics because of the knowledge passed through Church history.

The source of reason flows through Christian ethics both implicitly and explicitly as it guides people to form their own consciences. The Catholic Church does not promote blind faithfulness; instead, the Church hopes to guide believers into moral thought through the use of reason. In Francis's recent encyclical *Amoris Lætitia*, the Pope emphasized, "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them."<sup>14</sup> As Francis writes, the goal is that people will use reason to interpret Church teachings and documents to shape their conscience, even if that means debating or disagreeing with these authoritative sources. Reason is also used more explicitly in Christian ethics by relying on philosophical concepts such as Natural Law Theory. Natural Law Theory is the attempt to understand God's morality by studying the ways that God constructed nature.<sup>15</sup> The bishops use reasons in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* to discuss God's creation of man and woman and their biological compatibility for reproduction. The USCCB argues that because God created males and females, reproductive sex is God's moral will and homosexuality goes against God's eternal law. Because reason is relative and not absolute, Natural Law cannot tell you exactly what to think. Rather, this theory provides a

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<sup>14</sup> Francis, *Amoris Lætitia*, (Vatican City: Catholic Church, 2016), no. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Allman, "A Crash Course in Christian Ethics," in *Who Would Jesus Kill?: War, Peace, and the Christian Tradition*, (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 2008), 49.

framework for a particular way of thinking when facing a moral dilemma. The source of reason guides Christian ethics both implicitly and explicitly in forming consciences and ethical beliefs.

The final and perhaps the most insightful yet underutilized source of Christian ethics is that of lived experience. As a source, lived experience integrates collective and individual life experiences and the interdisciplinary use of the social sciences to craft holistic responses to ethical dilemmas.<sup>16</sup> This source acknowledges the limits of theological interpretation and relies on outside information to strengthen moral arguments. Furthermore, this source allows ethicists to connect directly with the populations they claim to be speaking for.<sup>17</sup> A foundational question for the source of lived experience is, “In whose service are the questions formed?”<sup>18</sup> That concern grounds Christian ethicists in their work. Lived experiences provide tangible evidence about individuals and communities, which helps create solutions that better fit the community. One solution crafted by Christian ethicists will not fit all communities universally. So, close listening and care for the people theologian and clergy serve will create more appropriate responses. The USCCB uses the source of lived experience the least, which diminishes the document’s goals of encouraging compassion and responsibility. Lived experience is an insightful addition to Christian ethics and is deserving of equal attention when using all four sources of Christian ethics to create an ethical response. Let’s examine how lived experience is employed in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*.

### **“A Call Social Justice” Shortcomings**

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<sup>16</sup> Melanie Harris, Kate Ott, and Maria Teresa Davila, “A Latina Methodology for Christian Ethics: The Role of the Social Sciences in the Study and Praxis of the Option for the Poor in the United States,” in *Faith, Feminism, and Scholarship: The Next Generation*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

“A Call to Social Justice” is one of the final sections of the document, but I want to discuss it first because it is the crux of my research. Furthermore, revealing the flaws of this section of the document will better frame how lived experience can improve the other sections of *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*. “A Call to Social Justice” implements the concepts discussed throughout the document. This section is when the bishops begin pushing their agenda for concrete change at the government, diocesan, and parish levels. The bishops write about continued scientific research, care for the disabled, families of persons with AIDS, and other social justice topics. But the subsection I will be focusing on is “3. Immigrants and Refugees”.

The “Immigrants and Refugees” subsection is striking because out of the 34-page document the bishops only included two sentences for special consideration for HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. First of all, this is surprising because the USCCB lists “care for immigrants” as a central purpose of the assembly.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, two sentences are insufficient considering the extensive vulnerabilities and struggles of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. If the bishops indeed regarded immigrants’ and refugees’ lived experiences, they would have written more extensively on this issue.

The two sentences in this section pertain to the HIV travel ban that was in place from 1987 to 2010.<sup>20</sup> When *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* was written, the travel ban had been active for two years. The bishops criticized the HIV travel ban because it kept HIV-positive people from entering the United States and permitted the deportation of permanent resident

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<sup>19</sup> USCCB, "About USCCB," USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/about>.

<sup>20</sup> CDC, "Medical Examination of Aliens-Removal of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (Hiv) Infection from Definition of Communicable Disease of Public Health Significance." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2009/11/02/E9-26337/medical-examination-of-aliens-removal-of-human-immunodeficiency-virus-hiv-infection-from-definition>.

immigrants if they tested positive.<sup>21</sup> The bishops called for “a more flexible and humane government policy.”<sup>22</sup> In January of 2010, the CDC removed HIV from the travel ban communicable disease list.<sup>23</sup> This change was a significant success and recognition by the government of the human dignity of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. But because this change to government policy occurred, today there is no pertinent information in *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* for special consideration for HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. Immigrants and refugees continue to face incredible hardship, yet there are no recommendations now in the document that can guide parish and government action to support this community of people. The USCCB did not adequately consider the experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS and neglected sufficient attention to their lived experiences. This weakens the document’s goals to achieve compassion and responsibility for all. I will analyze the “A Call to Compassion” and “A Call to Responsibility” sections in the document and assert that providing more attention to the lived experiences will better meet the document’s goals of inciting more compassion and responsibility.

### **Cultivating Compassion Through Relationship**

The second section of the document, “A Call to Compassion,” is directed toward the parishioners and clergy whom HIV/AIDS does not afflict. “A Call to Compassion” aims to define compassion, learn about compassion through Jesus’s life, and claim that compassion is the

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<sup>21</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Called to Compassion and Responsibility,” USCCB (2014): 20, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Called-to-Compassion-and-Responsibility.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>23</sup> CDC, “Medical Examination of Aliens-Removal of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (Hiv) Infection from Definition of Communicable Disease of Public Health Significance.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2009/11/02/E9-26337/medical-examination-of-aliens-removal-of-human-immunodeficiency-virus-hiv-infection-from-definition>.

only authentic response to the sick. The bishops begin by writing, “Compassion is much more than sympathy. It involves an experience of intimacy by which one participates in another’s life.”<sup>24</sup> Compassion moves beyond kindness and focuses on accompaniment to help alleviate the suffering of another.

The bishops then use the ministry of Jesus as an example of how to be compassionate. They cite Christ healing lepers, giving sight to the blind, and allowing the disabled to walk.<sup>25</sup> The readers can compare how to show compassion toward people with HIV/AIDS by reading about how Jesus helped the sick. The bishops also include verses from the gospel of Matthew that intimidate the audience into being compassionate. “‘What you do not do for one of these least ones you did not do for me.’ And these will go off to eternal punishment.”<sup>26</sup> Holding salvation over the audience is a solid motivator to be compassionate toward your neighbor. I do not think the bishops intended to scare the audience into being merciful by referencing this verse from Matthew. Instead, I think this verse shows the gravity and importance of choosing to be compassionate.

The bishops conclude this section by arguing that compassion is the only authentic gospel response toward the sick.<sup>27</sup> They reference Pope John Paul’s visit to San Francisco, where the Pope said that God loves all people, the sick, the elderly, and the caretakers, unconditionally.<sup>28</sup> The bishops elaborate on the Pope’s message by saying that people with HIV should not be distant from parish communities. It is an individual and communal responsibility to show the

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<sup>24</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Called to Compassion and Responsibility,” USCCB (2014): 10, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Called-to-Compassion-and-Responsibility.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

sick unconditional love.<sup>29</sup> The bishops encourage closeness and intimacy with the suffering in this section. They are making an effort to encourage church members and leaders to go to the margins and accompany people with HIV because that is how to live out compassion.

This message about compassion proves the importance of lived experience in achieving the document's goals of addressing compassion and responsibility. The bishops argue that compassion and engaging with people's lived experiences with HIV/AIDS cannot be separated. I want to reemphasize how the bishops describe compassion, "it involves an experience of intimacy by which one participates in another's life."<sup>30</sup> Being with and listening closely to someone suffering triggers feelings of sadness, empathy, and love. And this is a universal response amongst healthy and emotionally-stable people because of our human nature. It is impossible to listen to another person's suffering and not feel strong emotions that make you feel more connected to them. This is how the source of lived experience acts within *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*. When the bishops share the lived experiences of people with HIV/AIDS, it invites the audience into a space of authenticity and vulnerability. The audience participates in the suffering through lived experience, which incites compassion.

To deepen this understanding of compassion through relationships, I would like to emphasize the importance of relational distance. Dr. Christopher Carter, a Theology professor and Methodist pastor, describes the power of relational distance in his book *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice*. "Something can be cheapened once we create relational distance *from it*. Moreover, our distance from 'it' allows us to make it into an object, we cheapen it by making it into a 'thing,' essentially non-sentient object. It is our inability to recognize and accept our relational responsibilities as a part of nature as such that enables human beings to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

cheapen subjects into objects.”<sup>31</sup> While Dr. Carter uses relational distance to discuss the harms of slavery and food injustices, I can also apply this principle to HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. The closer the relationship, the more invested you are in their well-being and the more care you have for them. But if the connection is weak or nonexistent, then we are more likely to turn people into abstract things that no longer deserve respect. It is critical to hold the lived experiences of HIV-positive immigrants close to our hearts. Their stories must be uplifted and amplified to bridge the relational gap. Relationship combats the apathy and lack of interest in the lives of immigrants and refugees and promotes compassion as the bishops envisioned.

Similarly, relationships help us reflect on *Imago Dei*, which can also nurture love. Catholics hold that all people are made in the image and likeness of God. Pope Francis reflected on the implication of *Imago Dei* by explaining that “we are called to have care and respect for all creatures, and to offer love and compassion to our brothers and sisters, especially the most vulnerable among us, in imitation of God’s love for us.”<sup>32</sup> All people are made in the image of God, so everyone is deserving of love, dignity, and compassion. When we enter into a relationship, it encourages us to reflect on this concept and better understand God’s desire for us to love one another. St. Thomas Aquinas believed that the two greatest commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor.<sup>33</sup> Understanding *Imago Dei* through relationship propels us to understand these two commandments at once. It may be challenging to see God in someone very different from yourself, but relationships confront this dilemma. Connection forces us to move beyond surface-level differences and understand our shared human dignity, inherent because of

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food : Race, Faith, and Food Justice*, University of Illinois Press, 2021: 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, "General Audience." 2020, accessed May 10, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200422\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200422_udienza-generale.html).

<sup>33</sup> Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 246.

our creation in God's image. Embracing immigrants and refugees with HIV helps us recognize that they are God's creation. They too are deserving of love and compassion. Their lived experiences may be vastly different from others, but relationships enable us to meditate on the fact that every person is worthy of compassion.

### **Rethinking Responsibility**

The fourth section of *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*, "A Call to Responsibility," is the next focus of this thesis. The bishops' goals in this section emphasize personal and social responsibility to mitigate the spread of HIV and care for the vulnerable. To be clear, personal responsibility in the context of HIV is individual action that impacts personal health and prevents the spread of the disease.<sup>34</sup> Social responsibility calls upon society to be committed to pursuing the health of the community because it benefits the common good.<sup>35</sup> The writing is directed not only to those who may find themselves in high-risk HIV situations but also to people who support, educate, and care for the sick. The bishops specifically focus on the impact of homosexuality and substance abuse on the spread of HIV.

Beginning with the statements on homosexuality, the bishops express that "while homosexual inclination in itself is not a sin, neither is homosexual activity 'an acceptable option.'"<sup>36</sup> The bishops view homosexual activity as a violation of God's natural law. They go on to explain that people who are homosexual should remain in chaste relationships and should not

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<sup>34</sup> Meredith Minkler, "Personal Responsibility for Health? A Review of the Arguments and the Evidence at Century's End," *Health Education & Behavior* 26, no. 1 (1999): 122. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/109019819902600110>.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas L Weed and Robert E. McKeown, "Science and Social Responsibility in Public Health," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 111, no. 14 (November 2003): 1804. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.6198>.

<sup>36</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called to Compassion and Responsibility," USCCB (2014): 17, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Called-to-Compassion-and-Responsibility.pdf>

engage in sexual activity.<sup>37</sup> But the bishops also recognize that being homosexual is not inherently sinful. In fact, they wrote that, “the Church holds that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, are created in God’s image and possess a human dignity which must be respected and protected.”<sup>38</sup> The bishops include this to condemn the violence and prejudice that the LGBTQ community faces. They are clear that LGBTQ people are deserving of special understanding and care from their respective church communities. In this section, the bishops navigate affirming the dignity of LGBTQ people while censuring their lifestyle.

The bishops then analyze the role of substance abuse in the HIV/AIDS crisis. HIV can be contracted through a contaminated hypodermic needle and then spread through sexual contact, mother to child, or continued needle sharing. While sexual contact is the most common transmission of HIV, exposure to contaminated blood carries the highest probability of infection.<sup>39</sup> The bishops are sensitive to the struggles of people who struggle with substance abuse and write, “They merit our special attention and need to be embraced in light of their double burden of illness and addiction... it is important to see substance abuse as an actual or potential disease.”<sup>40</sup> The bishops describe substance abuse as “enslavement” and a “life-threatening disease,” which emphasizes the severity of this problem. But their sympathy for substance abusers does not lessen their call for personal and social responsibility. The bishops write that people who abuse substances need to change their behavior and seek assistance.<sup>41</sup> They also call upon the community to increase outreach through schools, religious groups, employers,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Whiteside, *Hiv/Aids: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford, January 24, 2008: 38.

<sup>40</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Called to Compassion and Responsibility,” USCCB (2014): 17-18, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Called-to-Compassion-and-Responsibility.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 17.

and street programs because education and treatment are essential in combating substance abuse.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the bishops conclude the section by suggesting that the government should support more outreach and drug treatment programs.<sup>43</sup>

Although the information provided by the bishops in “A Call to Responsibility” is significant to understanding HIV, they failed to include how acknowledgment of lived experiences can enhance social and personal responsibility. I argue that accentuating the lived experience of marginalized HIV-positive people, particularly immigrants and refugees, would strengthen the bishops’ goals of emphasizing personal and social responsibility to reduce the spread of HIV and care for the vulnerable. First, personal responsibility is promoted by sharing lived experiences because it allows for vicarious learning. Vicarious learning is when one person can “learn through the experiences of another...through discussion (or discourse), conflict, challenge, support and scaffolding from a more competent other.”<sup>44</sup> The San Diego LGBT Community Center has had significant success with the vicarious learning model. This organization hosts peer-to-peer lead support groups for HIV-positive people. The support groups reflect different identities such as transgender, Latinx, female, and elderly.<sup>45</sup> Support group participants listen to their peer mentor’s successes and struggles in their HIV/AIDS journey. The participants can integrate their mentor’s lived experiences into their own lives and learn how to act more responsibly for themselves. Churches can adopt vicarious learning models like this to support HIV-positive immigrants and refugees better. Churches can provide a space for healing

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>44</sup> Debbie Roberts, "Vicarious Learning: A Review of the Literature." *Nurse Education in Practice* 10, no. 1 (2010): 13-16. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2009.01.017>.

<sup>45</sup> The San Diego LGBT Community Center, "Programs and Services," <https://thecentersd.org/programs-and-services/>.

and growth by facilitating support groups that assist vicarious learning by sharing lived experiences.

Close listening to lived experiences of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees can also improve social responsibility. The sharing of lived experiences encourages kinship, promoting a sense of responsibility to each other. Father Gregory Boyle discusses kinship, compassion, and the marginalized in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*. I would like to highlight this passage from the book that explains how kinship and relationship work to create a more inclusive community:

Only kinship. Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God might recognize it. Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless, and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop.<sup>46</sup>

Kinship is an understanding of belonging to one another even if people are not connected through blood relationships. It is about understanding how one person's human dignity is intrinsically linked to another's. Those who have HIV/AIDS often find themselves pushed to the margins of society, where their voices are not heard. So, those with privilege, power, health, and wealth should challenge themselves to go beyond their typical social circles. They should locate themselves amongst people who have been silenced and listen intimately to their stories. By doing this, communities start to build relationships, and people are then more willing to contribute to the common good because they understand that it is beneficial to everyone. Sharing

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<sup>46</sup> Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2010: 153.

lived experiences is powerful because it makes communities more inclusive, caring, and responsible to each other.

### **Implementing Change on the Parish Level**

I have examined three sections of the document “A Call to Social Justice,” “A Call to Compassion,” and “A Call to Responsibility” and discussed how the sharing of lived experiences could enhance compassion and responsibility. I would like to move into the next section of my research, which implements these ideas into action steps. Following the original format of *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*, I will be offering ways for parishes to be involved in making change for HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. Before I begin, it is necessary to note that the bishops included parish action steps in other sections of their document but not the “Immigrants and Refugees” subsection. These are my curated program suggestions chosen through an extensive literature review and study of ways that Catholic churches currently support immigrants and refugees.

The most effective way for parish communities to live out the values of compassion and responsibility is through direct participation. Therefore, I would like to highlight the University of San Diego’s Ministry program and its engagement with HIV-positive immigrants. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, University Ministry offered monthly Tijuana Day Trips for undergraduate and graduate students. University Ministry describes the program as such:

We cross the US/Mexico border, just half an hour south of campus, and spend the day learning from communities that have welcomed USD [University of San Diego] students into their homes, and their lives, for the past 20 years. Without picking up a paintbrush or a shovel, the day is an opportunity to reimagine what

justice looks like to refine our questions of privilege, and to work towards building mutual relationships.<sup>47</sup>

The group would visit residents at Casa Las Memorias, a volunteer-run AIDS hospice, during the visit. As emphasized in the description above, visiting the hospice was not about saviorship but a sharing of community and relationships. The students built quality relationships with the residents, as many students returned month after month for years. The volunteers and residents at Casa Las Memorias shared their lived experiences and discussed the intersection between HIV and immigration issues. This direct engagement and development of relationships is the most fruitful way to live out the concepts of compassion and responsibility. Sitting in community with the Casa Las Memorias residents increased compassion amongst the student participants and taught the students how they could act more responsibly to benefit the common good. I strongly encourage University Ministry to restart this program when it no longer places the residents at risk of contracting COVID-19. I also urge other churches to start similar programs and build relationships with local HIV communities. Programs based on community participation allow people to discover how compassion and responsibility are lived out.

In the document, the bishops often emphasize the importance of education in keeping people healthy and preventing the spread of HIV. Parishes should be a space for education rather than shame. This means that parishioners and clergy must reflect on their biases against people who are HIV-positive, LGBTQ, recovering addicts, or immigrants. This takes introspection and conversation amongst the church community. One resource that clergy and parishioners can use to reflect on implicit biases is Project Implicit which helps reveal biases against people of different genders, abilities, races, and religions. After personal reflection, church leadership

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<sup>47</sup> University Ministry, "Tijuana Day Trips," University of San Diego, <https://www.sandiego.edu/ministry/service-and-social-justice/immersion/breaking-ground.php>.

should focus on sharing accurate and helpful information with HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. This could mean providing a list of community resources to newly arrived immigrants and refugees that includes, but is not limited to, local medical clinics, immigration attorneys, and support groups. Connecting people to these resources can help HIV-positive immigrants and refugees feel more welcomed and included in their new parish community.

Finally, prayer is central to all Catholic parishes and can be employed to show care for immigrants and refugees who are HIV-positive. There are five primary forms of prayer: meditative, ritual, petitionary, and colloquial prayer.<sup>48</sup> Clergy and laypeople have personal prayer preferences that influence prayer duration, content, and style. Prayer can also take a physical form through practices such as the Rosary or Station of the Cross. One way that parishes can practice prayer for immigrants and refugees who are HIV-positive is through the creation of an HIV/AIDS memorial quilt. This project is inspired by the official AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was last on display in 1996.<sup>49</sup> The AIDS Memorial Quilt was an impactful display of activism and resilience. The quilt was about 40,000 squares large which covered the entire National Mall.<sup>50</sup> Families and friends created quilt squares to publicly commemorate loved ones who died of AIDS. The AIDS Memorial Quilt was a monumental mourning ritual that brought attention to the hundreds of thousands of AIDS victims.<sup>51</sup> Parishes can create a similar project on a smaller scale. Families can create quilt squares that recognize the hardships of both HIV and immigration. The design and sewing of the quilt can be a form of prayer as it can be a meditative

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse, "Prayer and Altruism," in *Catch the Fire: Soaking Prayer and Charismatic Renewal*, 47. Cornell University Press, 2014.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvw1d4p0.6>.

<sup>49</sup> Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 605.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940327>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 605.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

and ritualistic practice. The mind can contemplate the struggles of Christ and how it relates to the struggles of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees while the hand moves in a rhythmic pattern to create the stitches. Once the quilt is complete, it can be displayed in the church's narthex to remind parishioners to keep the marginalized and sick in their daily prayers.

Participation, education, and prayer are three ways that parishes can incorporate the lived experiences of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. These action steps can increase compassion for the sick and promote responsibility on the community level.

### **Harms Caused by Migration Protection Protocol**

Human Rights First shared the story of Gisela who traveled from Honduras to the United States seeking asylum. Gisela was returned to Mexico by a U.S. border official under the Migration Protection Protocol. As she was leaving a migration office in Mexico, Gisela was kidnapped, raped, and sold into sexual slavery for three months until she escaped.<sup>52</sup> Tragically, this is not an isolated incident. Over 1,500 asylum seekers and migrants reported cases of rape, torture, kidnapping, violent assault, and murder after being forced to wait in Mexico for their asylum hearing.<sup>53</sup>

In 2019 President Donald Trump instated the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), casually known as the Remain in Mexico Policy. This policy allowed US border officials to return asylum seekers to Mexico to wait for their asylum hearing with the U.S. immigration courts.<sup>54</sup> From 2019 to 2021, 71,000 people seeking asylum were forced to stay in dangerous

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<sup>52</sup> Human Rights First, "Delivered to Danger: U.S. Government Sending Asylum Seekers and Migrants to Danger," Updated February 19, 2021, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/remain-mexico>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch, "'Remain in Mexico': Overview and Resources," 2022, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/07/remain-mexico-overview-and-resources>.

locations in Mexico for months, if not years.<sup>55</sup> Of this group, many were pregnant women, children, LGBTQ identifying, or suffering from chronic health conditions such as HIV.<sup>56</sup> President Joe Biden criticized this program during his presidential campaign stating the “‘Remain in Mexico’ policy is dangerous, inhumane, and goes against everything we stand for as a nation of immigrants.”<sup>57</sup> MPP was terminated in June 2021 after President Joe Biden was elected. Alejandro Mayorkas, secretary of Homeland Security, released an official declaration explaining the termination of MPP. He stated that the policy exposed asylum seekers to extreme violence and prevented asylum seekers from obtaining safe housing, healthcare, and food.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, MPP was only suspended briefly before the Biden administration reinstated the program in December 2021 due to a Supreme Court ruling.<sup>59</sup> MPP is still in place, and there are no current efforts to remove it despite the overwhelming evidence that the policy causes irreparable harm. MPP is particularly harmful against HIV-positive asylum seekers. Mexico offers free healthcare to migrants, but that does not mean that there is equitable healthcare access.<sup>60</sup> It is critical that HIV-positive people have access to antiretroviral therapy medication to keep their viral load low and prevent the disease from advancing to AIDS.<sup>61</sup> But HIV-positive migrants might face difficulties obtaining this medication due to the distance of the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> JoeBiden. Twitter post, March 11, 2020, 5:08 p.m. <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1237893066981117956?s=20&t=5RqHtKciQ7FaQWBUzpJjBQ>

<sup>58</sup> Alejandro N. Mayorkas, *Termination of the Migrant Protection Protocols Program*, Washington, DC, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch, "US: Supreme Court Ruling Endangers Asylum Seekers Biden Administration Should Maintain Course to End ‘Remain in Mexico’ Program," 2021, accessed May 13, 2022,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/26/us-supreme-court-ruling-endangers-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>60</sup> Philippe Stoesslé and Francisco Gonzalez-Salazar, "Right to Health for Undocumented Migrants in Mexico: From Theory to Practice in the Context of the Health System Reform," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 18, no. 1 (2022): 31.

<sup>61</sup> Whiteside, Alan. *Hiv/Aids: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford, January 24, 2008.

clinic and stigmatization by medical providers.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, HIV-positive asylum seekers may be forced to live in cramped shelters or improvised settlements, which can lead to a lack of hygiene and the spread of viruses.<sup>63</sup> HIV-positive people have compromised immune systems, so an illness that may be minor to another person can cause some with HIV to become very sick. Finally, some of the cities that asylum-seekers are sent to are designated by the U.S. government as level 4 travel advisory which is the same designation as places like Syria, Afghanistan, and North Korea.<sup>64</sup> Asylum seekers face the serious risk of sexual violence which can lead to the transmission or spread of HIV. Problems such as these, caused by US immigration policies, deny the human dignity of HIV-positive asylum seekers and put them at an increased risk of developing further health complications.

The Catholic Church has been active in trying to end MPP and achieve justice for asylum seekers. In January 2021, the USCCB, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and Catholic Charities USA Network filed an *amicus curiae* to the Supreme Court urging the Justices to remove MPP.<sup>65</sup> These organizations provided sound legal reasoning to explain why MPP violated the United States non-refoulment principle while incorporating Catholic values such as human dignity and the inherent value of human life. In 2019, a coalition of bishops in Texas released a statement condemning MPP for causing unsafe living conditions in Mexico, lack of legal

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<sup>62</sup> Philippe Stoesslé and Francisco Gonzalez-Salazar, "Right to Health for Undocumented Migrants in Mexico: From Theory to Practice in the Context of the Health System Reform," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 18, no. 1 (2022): 31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHS-03-2020-0028>. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHS-03-2020-0028>.

<sup>63</sup> Ietza Bojorquez, et al. "Migrants in Transit and Asylum Seekers in Mexico: An Epidemiological Analysis of the Covid-19 Pandemic," *MedRxiv* (May 13 2020): 12. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.08.20095604>.

<sup>64</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Travel Advisories." U.S. Department of State, 2022, accessed 2022, May 13, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/>.

<sup>65</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and Catholic Charities USA. *Wolf V. Innovation Lab*, 2021.

support, and lack of familial support.<sup>66</sup> The bishops began the statement by writing, “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*” (Mt 25:35). This verse from the Book of Matthew can inspire how Catholics advocate for immigrants and refugees. From laypeople to the Pope, all Catholics have been called to serve and care for the most marginalized. Catholics in the United States should be involved in challenging immigration policies such as MPP.

### **Concluding Remarks**

HIV continues to be a significant public health dilemma, and Church leaders, government officials, and immigration advocates should support HIV-positive immigrants and refugees. In short, HIV-positive immigrants and refugees are deserving of special consideration and additional care. But when the bishops wrote *Called to Compassion and Responsibility*, they did not adequately consider the experiences of immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS and neglected sufficient attention to their lived experiences. The bishops’ lack of awareness of the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees hinders the document’s objective of encouraging compassion for the sick and promoting responsibility to prevent the spread of HIV. Providing more attention to lived experiences enhances compassion because compassion demands relationship. Furthermore, sharing lived experiences allows for vicarious learning, which translates to increased personal responsibility. Social responsibility benefits because relationships bolster community, advance the common good and reveal how each person’s well-being is connected. These concepts of compassion and responsibility can be implemented through parish action and changes to government policy. Parishes can better serve HIV-positive immigrants and refugees through participation, education and prayer. Finally, MPP needs to be reevaluated

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<sup>66</sup> Tex-Mex Border Bishops, "Statement of the Bishops of the Border between Texas and Northern Mexico," 2019, accessed May 13, 2022, [https://www.elpasodiocese.org/uploads/5/4/9/5/54952711/tex-mex\\_03.04\\_english\\_statement.pdf](https://www.elpasodiocese.org/uploads/5/4/9/5/54952711/tex-mex_03.04_english_statement.pdf)

because of the harm it has caused all asylum seekers, but especially HIV-positive asylum seekers. A more compassionate and humane immigration policy is necessary.

Pope Francis wrote in the recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, “Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power.”<sup>67</sup> This message from the Pope reminds us that the lives of HIV-positive immigrants and refugees are precious and we must make continual efforts to center their experience. I encourage you to go further and build relationships with unexpected people. Reach out to the marginalized and care for the sick. Each of us is capable of extending a hand to those in need. So, let us not forget those who have been pushed aside.

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<sup>67</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications: sec 215.

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