

# NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

November 18, 2019  
MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE, NEW YORK, NY

## Attendance:

Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Harold Berman,  
Leslie Brier, Martin Budd, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Joel Meyers, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi  
David Sandmel, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Avi Winokur, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Allyson  
Zacharoff

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Bishop James Massa, Bishop William Murphy, Bishop Mitchell Rozanski,  
Bishop Edward Scharfenberger, Fr. James Loughran, Fr. Guy Massie, Julia McStravog, Fr. David  
Michael, Jan Skrehot, Fr. Stephen Ries, Fr. Walter Kedjierski, Rebecca Cohen, Nancy Robinson,  
Fr. Dennis McManus

## Guests:

Eleanor Acer, Mark Hetfield, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, Adriana Rodriguez

## MINUTES RECORDED BY RABBI HAROLD BERMAN

**Cardinal Timothy Dolan** opened the meeting with prayer and a welcome to delegates and guests. **Rabbi David Straus** shared passages from Scripture that focus on the obligation to care for the poor and the stranger.

Delegates were welcomed by representatives of the museum and invited to tour the facility at the close of the meeting.

## FOCUSING ON THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS IN AMERICA TODAY

**Eleanor Acer, Senior Director for Refugee Protection, Human Rights First**, spoke of challenging the United States Government to be a champion of Human Rights around the world. She listed the standards that are binding on all nations as principles of international law, enacted in the aftermath of World War II:

- Not returning a refugee who has a well-founded fear of persecution
- Not punishing refugees for illegally crossing a border

These were enacted into law in the United States in 1980

**Ms. Acer** noted that various U. S. policies now contravene these principles. The U. S. discourages refugees from coming and punishes them for trying to cross U. S. borders. Additional policies also make asylum more difficult. She noted that present policies, particularly at the Southern Border, push people back into Mexico and require them to

remain in places where they are often in danger. During waiting periods people face the threat of kidnapping, assault and other kinds of abuse and are forced to live in circumstances of extreme hardship. People fear staying near the border, but if they move away from the border they risk missing out on essential sources of information and opportunities for representation before authorities. Many return to the places from which they fled as a result.

**Mark Hetfield, President and CEO of HIAS** (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), noted that his organization was originally established, in 1881, in the New York neighborhood where the Museum of Jewish Heritage now stands. He offered that HIAS helps people, “Not because they are Jewish, but because we are Jewish,” and therefore seeks to assist immigrants of all backgrounds. He noted that the Jewish teaching of helping the stranger is repeated thirty six times in the Torah, “not because it is the most important, but because it is the easiest to forget.” He shared a video that offered an overview and examples of the work HIAS does.

**Mr. Hetfield** noted that there are more than seventy million displaced persons in the world. He explained that the 1980 law, passed overwhelmingly by Congress, created a resettlement process as well as asylum principles. A recent unpublished study by the present administration, seeking to determine how much refugees cost the United States, concluded that refugees contribute to the economy more than \$60 billion more than the costs expended to settle them.

Regretfully, resettlement has become a partisan issue, and an Executive Order of the current administration allowed states and municipalities to opt out of programs and currently requires states and municipalities to opt in if they want to participate in resettlement. This has taken enormous resources of various agencies to lobby for inclusion and has led to great uncertainty for those who need help.

In the **discussion** that followed the two presentations it was noted that the U. S. government, having discouraged and prevented refugees from coming, is now cancelling contracts with agencies and vendors based on lower numbers.

Immigration judges, it was noted, are not independent arbiters, but rather are subject to the policies set in place by the Department of Justice. Currently Border Patrol officers are being used to interview people and determine their status instead of asylum officers.

Although there has been hostility to immigration before, the hostility of the present U. S. administration is unique. No administration previously sought to reduce the number of refugee admissions to zero. Now, as a result of considerable pressure, the number is set at 18,000, the lowest in history.

It was emphasized that many Americans know little or nothing of what is happening on the borders. Strong voices of faith leaders are needed. Family separation is still an issue and the status of young people under DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is still uncertain. There remains the potential of seeing huge numbers of people who have

spent most of their lives in the U. S. being deported. Advocacy for bills before congress is needed as well as lobbying to assure that states and municipalities will participate in programs. Many people think that legal options remain available to most who want them and do not understand how hard it is for people to find asylum in the United States.

**Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn**, offered Catholic insights on immigration, highlighting the right of people to migrate as proclaimed through papal encyclical. He noted that included in Catholic principles are:

- The right to freedom in one's own nation
- The right to migrate in order seek another home in another nation
- The right of nations to protect their borders
- The right to seek asylum
- The right of undocumented migrants to be respected

The papal message enjoins us to welcome, protect, promote and integrate those who migrate.

While many are concerned that immigrants take jobs from Americans, the truth is that immigrants generally take jobs that Americans are unwilling to fill.

Bishop DiMarzio noted that integration proceeds much more quickly than in previous generations. Assimilation that took several generations in earlier years takes place in one generation now. He also noted that the labor market is the least studied and most misunderstood element of our economy.

**Discussion** included focusing on the challenge of resistance to racial change and the desire, in many parts of the world, to perpetuate an ideal of White Supremacy.

It was also noted that foreign aid is important, and that the goal of helping people live better lives in their home nation continues to be a value. Asylum is a safety valve, not a solution. Nonetheless, drug violence and the cartels that spawn it as well as exploitation in various forms are not easily dislodged. There will always be a need for migration.

The group entertained and supported the suggestion of a Catholic/Jewish clergy visit to the U. S. border. A goal would be to offer support through clergy presence and prayer, and to connect with local congregations that are trying to help.

Topics for discussion at future meetings were placed on the table.

- What is our role as clergy in modulating and ameliorating divisiveness and anger that accompany political conversation, particularly in this election year? How can we encourage civility in public discourse? David Brooks was suggested as a possible guest speaker.

- Suicide: An epidemic among us. How does religious teaching help to find solutions?
- How do we include in our discussions those who are presently not represented in the room – more conservative elements in both Jewish and Catholic tradition?
- Ethnic identity and its impact on religious denominations
- How do we address those who have turned away from religious life entirely?
- Dealing with hostility to religion on college campuses and responses to the rise of non-denominational spirituality?
- Loneliness and its impact on our society.
- Marriage and the family – the Pope has identified concerns about the family as the central institution for the transmission of faith. How do we deal with the challenges families face and how do we deal with non-traditional families?

The next meeting of the dialogue group is scheduled **for Monday, June 15, at the offices of the Archdiocese of New York** (Cardinal Cooke Catholic Center, 1011 First Avenue, New York, NY 10022)

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman  
Executive Director  
National Council of Synagogues