

Trump's refugee policy is a miserable moral failure

So is our nation's long history of choosing economic success over global equity, safety, and wellbeing.

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(Photo by Tom Coe on Unsplash)

"I have reduced refugee resettlement by 85 percent!" bragged President Trump at a rally last year. He wasn't exaggerating by much. His first week in office, he issued an executive order that suspended the US Refugee Resettlement Program for 120 days and slashed the 2017 cap on refugee admissions from the 110,000 set by the Obama administration to 50,000. (Far fewer were actually admitted.) Each subsequent year, he has further reduced the cap.

Now Trump has announced that no more than 15,000 refugees will be allowed to resettle in the US in 2021. This is the lowest cap since Congress created the resettlement program in 1980. Meanwhile, forced migration is on the rise, and the number of refugees in the world is at its highest level since World War II.

Three days after Trump announced the 2021 refugee cap, Pope Francis published *Fratelli tutti*. The encyclical articulates the Christian obligation to welcome and protect migrants—especially those who are fleeing danger or persecution.

The United States is failing miserably at this. Trump's drastic reductions in refugee admissions have prevented local communities that want to offer compassion to migrants from doing so. Worse, they have decimated the faith-based organizations and other nonprofits that work with the State Department to resettle refugees. Agency staff have been laid off; buildings have been sold. At this point, reinstating a higher cap on refugee admissions would require an infusion of funding to restore the basic infrastructure that supports resettlement. It is a dire situation and a shameful reflection of the Trump administration's values.

Fratelli tutti doesn't just call Christians to welcome refugees. Francis also writes that the world is more stable when there's less unnecessary migration. To this end, he urges the promotion of safety, human rights, and equality in migrants' home countries.

Here, too, the US is failing miserably—and this failure can't be blamed on a single presidential administration or political party. The underlying problems that cause instability and oppression abroad are intricately connected to the behavior in recent decades of American politicians, corporations, and citizens. Rarely have our elected officials been willing to compromise the goals of global capitalism and unfettered economic growth for the sake of a broader vision that aims to protect the most vulnerable people and places and reduce the suffering caused by inequity. The forced migration Pope Francis decries is a shameful reflection of the values that have allowed many Americans to thrive.

As Advent approaches, Christians recall Mary's call for justice in the Magnificat; we envision God bringing down the world's powerful and lifting up the lowly. But just before Advent many churches will read Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46), and that text's message is crucial, too. Solving the refugee crisis will require global justice writ large. In the meantime, we are following Jesus when we give a drink of water to each thirsty person who approaches us.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The US is failing refugees."