

**Remarks at Press Conference  
Marygrove College  
July 17, 2014**

There is a humanitarian crisis going on in this country. There is a refugee crisis going on in this county. There is a refugee crisis as in large numbers of people, fellow human beings, seeking safety and refuge because their existing circumstances are inhumane, unlivable.

This shouldn't be a debate. It shouldn't be in doubt that we are witnessing a humanitarian crisis, a refugee crisis. The fleeing of vulnerable women, children, and young adults we are witnessing has all of the classic markings of what the world has seen in war-torn regions over and over again, war-torn regions in which unprotected, threatened civilians will take extreme measures to reach a safe haven. The only difference in this instance is that the threat to vulnerable civilians is not from standing armies engaged in traditional combat or even organized guerrilla warfare. In this instance, the threat is from brutally violent gangs, extortionists, and narco-traffickers operating with impunity in widespread areas of extreme lawlessness.

Yet, while there should be no doubt, politicians want to create doubt in your mind. While there should be no debate that we are witnessing a refugee crisis that calls for a charitable and humanitarian response, today—at this moment in our national media and political arena—there is debate on that point. Our elected leaders are all-too-frequently characterizing this situation as being the result of our broken immigration system, or as being the result of our lack of comprehensive immigration reform, or as being the result of some sort of mass-psychosis afflicting mothers in specific parts of this hemisphere who are spontaneously deciding to send their children on extraordinarily life-threatening journeys to far off lands. That doesn't make any sense.

The current crisis has all the classic markings of a refugee crisis. We are witnessing thousands of vulnerable women, children, and young people fleeing their homes and seeking safe haven elsewhere because they are under threat at home. This explanation is further evidenced by the fact that refugees in the region are not all seeking safety in this country. Individuals seeking asylum in other parts Central America are also up significantly.

What is the one common characteristic in all the explanations that deny this is a humanitarian crisis? It is the dehumanization of these women, children, and young adults. You're seeing it in these ugly protests. They're not like us. There is something different about them. They're not our brothers and sisters, they're disease carriers. They're not fellow human beings who are traumatized by violence and fear—like we would be if we experienced what they have experienced—instead, there is something wrong with them...they're less smart, less caring for their children...they're selfish and trying to come here to take something from me. I've even seen a video of an elected representative on the floor of the House of Representatives describe these traumatized women and children not as refugees but as “invaders”. It's so obvious what is going. It's the same argument that white segregationists used to deny rights to blacks in this country for decades. They're not like us.

Why am I personally passionate about this issue? I am personally passionate about this issue because I've seen and understand the results of dehumanization and I don't like it. As a young adult, I helped organize faculty in this country to go to Central America to try to be an international presence to protect other faculty under attack by repressive military regimes. Close friends and colleagues of mine from the University of Central America, a catholic college in El Salvador, were murdered because they were labeled a threat and less than human. I've seen and understand the results of dehumanization and I don't like it...it's painful, it denies our better selves, it makes us smaller and meaner as a country.

And, at Marygrove, we teach our students that they are expected to lead with their best selves. They are to demonstrate what we call “the Three Cs”: Competence, Compassion, and Commitment. We define compassion as caring about and respecting the worth and dignity of people. We talk about commitment as acting responsibly toward building a more just and humane world. And, at Marygrove, we practice what we teach.

**So, we are calling on President Obama to recognize these women and children as refugees. We are calling on President Obama to provide moral leadership in this crisis of thousands of refugee children fleeing violence and seeking safety here and elsewhere.**

I'm incredibly frustrated by the lack of moral leadership on an issue that literally screams for moral leadership. The surge in unaccompanied minors at the border is fundamentally a refugee situation. The Obama Administration needs to publicly call it that instead of asking for billions of dollars to essentially speed up deportation of vulnerable women,

children, and young adults. Mr. President, please, help the American people see the truth at our borders by using your powerful voice and position as our leader. Call out the humanity of these women and children by naming them refugees. There's a battle going on to define the American character. We need the President on our side.

**And, if you do, we pledge to do our part. We are doing more than just asking for something. We are committed that, if the President shows moral leadership on this issue, we are prepared to do our part to help.**

What do I mean by doing our part? If the President would show moral leadership on this issue, the college is prepared to provide scholarships for college-ready refugees to attend Marygrove and to consider making available excess beds in the college's former convent and newly renovated residence hall to house, feed, and provide security for other non-college-ready refugees.

But, I want to be clear, because there's a lot of smoke screening and deliberate confusion going on around this issue among politicians. Name these women and children refugees and treat them as refugees. And, that means stop trying to find "fast track" methods to make these refugees somebody else's problem. We will not be a part of a process that seeks fast track authority to expedite deportation back to unsafe conditions. Our Christian values will not let us be complicit in President Obama's currently proposed effort to accelerate the forcible deportation of children and young adults back to the violence they have fled.

**So, that's what we're doing at Marygrove. Calling on the President to exercise moral leadership and committing to do our part if he does. And, in discussing this response, I have been asked some questions. One is something to the effect of "why is the college taking this position in support of individuals who are so far away from Detroit when there is so much need in Detroit?"**

In my opinion, it is wrong to characterize the college's response to this humanitarian crisis as "either/or." Marygrove provides more than \$6 million in scholarships a year, most of which supports students from Detroit, most of whom represent the first generation in local low-income families to earn a college degree. Marygrove alumni give generously to support these scholarships. I hope and fully expect they will respond even more generously as a result of this action.

Of course, I understand that some people choose to respond to this crisis out of fear and choose to characterize it as ‘other people’ taking something from ‘us.’ But, Jesus does not call upon us to respond to our fellow human beings’ out of fear and selfishness. And, I believe the Marygrove community fundamentally views our response not as something being taken from us but as an opportunity to offer leadership that lifts up this country’s most cherished values and an opportunity to experience the joy and love of serving those in need.

I’ve also been asked: do you really think you can make a difference by yourself? A question to which I answer with a question: do you really think Marygrove will be by itself for long? Do you really think that the hundreds and thousands of college campuses, the millions of college students across this country are going to remain silent on this issue for long? The lives of thousands of children and young people are at risk. We cannot be silent. I urge my colleagues at the helms of colleges around this nation to join me in calling on President Obama to show moral leadership on this issue and, if possible, to join Marygrove in pledging housing, food, security and education if the President would act with a moral compass.

As a Catholic institution—guided by the Gospel values of love, compassion, reconciliation, and justice— we are proud to be the first higher educational institution in the nation to publicly commit to supporting young refugees from Central America and we hope and fully expect that others will follow our lead on this.