

## **Are These Not Our Children?**

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of Maryland

A Pastoral Letter in Response to the Refugee Crisis

*July 22, 2014*

Yesterday I joined with faith leaders from across Maryland to meet with Governor Martin O'Malley in Annapolis to address the humanitarian crisis facing our nation of the large numbers of young refugees seeking to enter into the United States.

In recent weeks almost 60,000 Central American children have flooded across the U.S. border to escape poverty, sexual assaults, murder and drug-related gang violence in their home countries. The hard policy question of what to do about these children has set off an intense national debate about borders, immigration, law and compassion. But in a larger sense, the crisis has caused us to reflect on what our values are as a nation, and who we are as Christians who base our ethical actions from Holy Scriptures that remind us of the sanctity and dignity of every human being.

One of those foundations is the Biblical tradition of welcoming the stranger in our midst, which I have written to you about before. But no matter where you are on the policy questions about the need for immigration reform and securing our nation's borders, the crisis before us now is this: what do we do about these terrified children who have risked everything in the hope of living in a world where they can be safe, have a roof over their head and adequate food to eat? The government has its role in what to do with them legally and politically, but our church's role as disciples of Jesus Christ is very, very clear:

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my children, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:35-40)

On the question of what to do about these refugee children huddled in camps and institutions in our country, the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland will take its marching orders from the Bible: we will do what we can to care for them. I am working with the governor's office and religious leaders in Maryland to see how we can all play our part. An action plan for the religious community is being developed within the next two weeks.

An ecumenical message for people of faith will be forthcoming as well. All of these will be available on our diocesan website as soon as they are completed. In the meantime, I call on all Episcopalians to discuss in their churches how they might respond.

Of the 60,000 refugees, it is estimated that Maryland's share would be taking in as many as 2,000 Central American children. According to state and federal officials, the top priority will be the reunification of unaccompanied minors with their families in Maryland. The second preference will be to place these children with families through the federal foster care system. While it may be possible to house many children in large spaces, this is clearly not the ideal setting for caring for children through their teenage years. Instead, the most urgent need right now is for foster homes to care for a child or two while they await their legal processing or reuniting with their families.

There will be many ways we as a Church and individually can help and provide support to these children. I ask you to prayerfully consider how you can help — whether through becoming or aiding a foster family, supporting local child welfare and legal services, or donating goods or services. In partnership with ERICA (Episcopal Refugee and Immigrant Center Alliance) at the Cathedral of the Incarnation, we will be gathering information in the coming weeks on how you can best respond to these needs. If you are interested in receiving this information please send an email to [uac@erica-baltimore.org](mailto:uac@erica-baltimore.org)

Let us pray daily for these children whose parents have decided that as dangerous as the trip to our border is, it is safer than allowing them to stay in their desperate communities. I call upon all our churches to include these young refugees in their Sunday intercessions. They are not throw-away victims from a far-away land; they are here. I believe that Jesus is asking us today, "Are not these your children?"