

The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh



April 21, 2017

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you may know, the State of Hawaii has challenged the Trump administration in court and has won an injunction barring implementation of the new executive order that severely limits immigrants and refugees seeking to enter this country. The case is now on appeal before the Ninth Circuit. Today a number of Episcopal bishops, myself included, are submitting an amicus brief in the case supporting the injunction and demanding that the administration reverse this policy. A link to the brief can be found with the copy of this letter as posted on the diocesan website.

Even though the brief identifies each bishop with his or her respective diocese, my signing does not commit the Diocese of Pittsburgh, our parishes, people, or clergy to any action, or for that matter, to any conformity of opinion. I am keenly aware of the great diversity of political convictions across the diocese. However, I want you to be aware of my reasons for taking this position.

First, as the brief clearly argues, the executive order appears to be a fulfillment of the many statements and promises made by the president, beginning in his campaign and since, toward a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” Subsequent modifications to these statements aside, I see at their root a generalized fear of the “other,” of those who do not look like “us” or think like “us.” I am troubled that a Muslim ban has been so enthusiastically embraced by those who view their own race as superior, a point of view dangerously represented within this administration. When policies of the State deny the image of God equally present in and among all human beings, I believe the Church is called to warn and to resist.

Second, I believe the Church has an absolute duty to support and protect the poor. The banning of refugees, even for a limited time, imposes a further burden upon some of the most desperate people in the world, whom the United States has always recognized a sacred responsibility to welcome. Whatever one may think of matters related to immigration, refugees are in a different class entirely. We are not speaking of an influx of those who come to take jobs or even to do us harm, but rather of women and children and families seeking safe haven from the impoverished and war-torn homelands from which they flee. One of the earliest titles of the bishop was *philothonos*, or “friend of the poor,” so when policies of the State consciously increase the misery of the most vulnerable, I believe bishops have a particular responsibility to speak out.

Of course, a counter argument could be made to my first two points by raising concerns about national security, which is a legitimate role of our government and responsibility of the president. In this case, I find those appeals specious, especially in regard to refugees. Those who seek the safety of our shores must pass a battery of checks that already are among the most stringent in the world. And while it is true that some radicals attack our values, we as a people have learned the errors of distrusting the many because of the actions of a few.

This brings me to my third concern. There appears to be an undercurrent of thought among some of the president's advisers that we are engaged in a great "clash of civilizations," the "Christian West" facing off against the "scourge of Islam," and that this administration has a unique role of leadership in spearheading the struggle. This, I believe, is actually the most pernicious thread underlying a misdirected policy. The State must never be allowed to usurp the voice of the Church, to claim— even implicitly— to speak in the name of Christ, particularly as the self-appointed protector of Christian values or Christian culture.

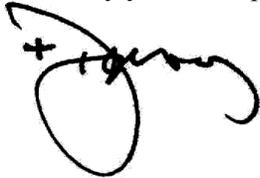
Finally, I have a deeply personal reason for speaking out. My mother was a refugee. She twice escaped from occupied France, and it is only through the kindness and bravery of those who assisted her, some of whom did so at the loss of their own lives, that I am alive to protest at all. In our own day, such help is given by Episcopal Migration Ministries, which is to my mind one of the finest missions of the Episcopal Church. I encourage us all to become familiar with them and consider contributing to their financial support. Their website is www.episcopalmigrationministries.org.

Before I conclude this letter, I wish to touch on a related matter. I have heard that some congregations have been considering putting themselves forward as "sanctuary parishes," particularly offering their own facilities for the shelter of those who might be in danger of deportation. I ask you to be very careful around any decision of this kind. There may be huge unintended consequences both for you and the persons you hope to protect. Neither federal law, nor the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, offer any protection whatsoever for persons seeking sanctuary in religious buildings; enforcement officers with proper judicial authorization may enter at will. As a result, your intervention in this regard might easily do more harm than good. My chancellor has forwarded relevant guidelines put together by the ACLU, and I commend them for your review. A link to them can also be found with the copy of this letter posted on the diocesan website.

Having said all this, I encourage everyone to offer any legal and reasonable support to individuals and families you may know of who suffer any difficulty because of their immigration status. I have heard of clergy and parishioners accompanying people to deportation hearings, helping them secure legal counsel, providing pastoral care to them and their families, and rendering other assistance. Actions such as these fulfill the biblical mandates to welcome the stranger and to defend the poor and needy, and are incumbent upon us all.

Please pray for the Church and for our country as we continue to move through this unsettled and troubling time. And pray for those who seek shelter among us, that we may welcome them without fear.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

(The Right Rev.) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh