



Assemblée des
évêques catholiques
du Québec

Message
for May 1st, 2025

Council on Church and Society



Migrations, the right to work, and integration

“You shall not wrong
or oppress a resident alien,
for you were aliens
in the land of Egypt.”

Exodus 22:20



May 1st,
International Workers' Day,
is also the feast day of Saint Joseph the Worker,
a craftsman who had to emigrate with his family to protect it.

A man who, a few years later, could only return to his country by settling in a region other than the one he had left¹. Two thousand years after this exile, reminiscent of that of the Hebrews in Egypt, and four hundred years after the designation of Saint Joseph as patron saint of New France, remembering this carpenter is an opportunity for us to invite the people of Quebec to demonstrate renewed hospitality towards migrants. This includes facilitating their access to decent, stable work that promotes their integration². It is also an opportunity to recognize the contribution made by migrants to the life of our communities. Many volunteers, pastoral workers, priests, deacons, and participants in Christian celebrations come from other parts of the world. The presence of these women, men, and families makes an important contribution to the dynamism and vitality of Quebec parishes.

However, in daily conversations or in the media, it is not uncommon to hear that “we’re already doing enough”, or even that “we’re doing too much”, in Quebec, for migrant people. In public debate, their needs are sometimes even put in competition with those of vulnerable people. This suspicious perception should give way to a sincere and constant concern for the inherent and inalienable dignity of every human person. In this way, we can offer here the kind of hospitality that we would wish to enjoy elsewhere, should we migrate in our turn.

A look at the current situation



The living and working conditions of immigrants are directly linked to the rapid economic transformations taking place in Quebec. According to 2006 and 2016 census data, the employment rate and average employment income of immigrant women living in Quebec (born in another country but having obtained permanent residency or Canadian citizenship) are significantly lower than those of non-immigrants³. In 2022, the employment rate for immigrants has slightly surpassed that of Quebec-born individuals, but this “can be explained in particular by the category of immigrants aged 55 and over⁴”, who retire later. In 2024, the unemployment rate for new arrivals and young people has risen to double the national rate in Quebec⁵. This is in addition to the well-documented employment challenges of belonging to a visible minority and graduating from another country⁶.

Migration occupies an important place in public debate in Quebec. This is not unrelated to the significant increase in the number of permanent immigrants and non-permanent residents welcomed in 2022 and 2023, which underpins recent discussions on lowering immigration thresholds⁷.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the essential role of many foreign-born people working in the health, agriculture, and food sectors was empathetically highlighted. Today, these same people who had been described as “guardian angels” are sometimes held responsible for critical situations whose causes are in fact complex: the housing crisis, the decline of the French language, inflation, overcrowding in hospital emergency rooms, lack of day-care places, shortage of space and teaching staff in schools, etc.

Many community organizations denounce this instrumentalization of migrants as scapegoats, and the inequities they have to endure in terms of their working conditions, as well as access to healthcare and social programs. Closed work permits for temporary migrant workers, lengthy delays for asylum seekers to obtain work permits, non-recognition of diplomas, major cuts in francization – the list goes on and on of what undermines the dignity of these people.

These injustices have a negative impact on their living conditions and their integration into the job market. It is paradoxical to question the level of integration of certain migrants without giving them adequate access to the things that make integration possible! How can you integrate without access to an activity, particularly work, and without being able to learn the French language? How can one want and be able to be involved in one's host community without a guarantee that one's situation will be stabilized, that a migrant who so desires will be able to immigrate in the long term?

Understanding in the light of our hope



In choosing the theme of migration, the right to work, and integration for this message, we are responding to the invitation recently extended to the Church in Quebec by the Holy Father's special envoy for the celebrations of the 350th anniversary of the Diocese of Quebec: "Stay focused on the fault lines that run through Quebec society today, whether they be economic, cultural or religious⁸". Over the past decade, the Catholic bishops of Quebec and Canada, together with their collaborators,

have spoken out on several occasions to remind Christians of their duty of hospitality towards migrants⁹. In so doing, we are perpetuating a long tradition that extends from the Word of God in the Old Testament to the daily actions of committees, parishes, dioceses, and Catholic organizations that sponsor refugees. This tradition is also rooted in the Gospels, and in the personal and community commitments of Christians inspired by them, in solidarity with migrants¹⁰.

With Pope Francis, we are putting forward an approach to hospitality based on four action verbs: welcome, protect, promote and integrate¹¹. This approach stems from Christ's unwavering commitment to the vulnerable, He who takes on, among others, the figure of the Stranger whom we welcome¹². On this action of welcoming, Pope Francis cited in 2018 "the principle of the centrality of the human person", affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, as what "obliges us to always put personal security before national security", and the Canadian bishops wrote as early as 2006 that "Catholic teaching sees, in laws and policies giving precedence to the national interest over the human dignity of persons, a fundamental inversion of values¹³."

In today's context, this teaching may come as a surprise, an even a cause for concern, to those who believe that Quebec society's "capacity for integration" is now surpassed. Yet Pope Francis also insists on "the need to foster, in every case, the culture of encounter,

by multiplying opportunities for intercultural exchange, documenting and disseminating ‘good practices’ of integration, and developing programs to prepare local communities for the processes of integration¹⁴”. Are we really doing enough in this respect?

Doing more

Today, the Catholic Church in Quebec encourages the integration of migrant Christians in all parishes, as well as the generous welcome, in neighborhoods, villages, and cities, of all people, whatever their origin or religion.

The Church also supports more targeted initiatives, such as the *Carrefour québécois d’hospitalité presbytérale*, which since 2019 aims to foster the integration of priests born in other parts of the world, who come on mission to Quebec to participate for a time in the life of our communities. The Church also supports integration initiatives led by community organizations regardless of faith, including the development of socialization, awareness and advocacy activities by the *Réseau d’aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec* (RATTMAQ) in several regions of the province.

Collectively, in Quebec society, the culture of encounter could be more highly valued, given that withdrawal into oneself remains a temptation. Because of the fundamental dignity of all people, no one should ever be treated as a mere means in a partisan joust or an economic project. Let us avoid any instrumentalization of migrants, and instead, ask ourselves how we can treat everyone with dignity. Here are a few ways of doing just that, both personally and collectively.



Doing more Personally

Pay particular attention to the ways in which I participate in private conversations and public debate about the place of migrant people, in order to promote their dignity by adopting a caring attitude;

Highlight the contribution of newcomers to my community. In my parish, my workplace, my leisure spaces, where I receive care, etc., recognize their contributions with gratitude;

Find out if people in my parish or neighborhood are having difficulty obtaining a work permit, finding a job or finding resources to learn French. Support them concretely if this is the case. Why not offer to converse with someone in French? If I recognize certain qualities, offer to be a reference for a job. Or let them know about job offers I come across. These small, concrete gestures make a real difference!

Doing more Collectively

Organize activities in our parishes and dioceses, as well as in the networks in which we are involved, to raise awareness of the realities experienced by migrant people in Quebec, starting with circulating this message for May 1st;

Learn about and support campaigns for social justice and structural change, including issues related to closed and open work permits, the importance of sponsorship programs for refugees, the need for francization programs, and equitable access to social programs and health care;

Support community and church organizations working locally, regionally, or provincially to welcome, protect, promote and integrate migrants, such as the Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec (RATTMAQ) and the Comité d'action contre la traite humaine interne et internationale (CATHII).



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This message was prepared by the Church and Society Council of the Assemblée des évêques catholiques du Québec, in collaboration with the Table de pastorale sociale des diocèses du Québec.

INFORMATIONS
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1. Matthew 2:13-23.
2. The concept of “decent work” is defined in the United Nations’ eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 8): “Decent work is the opportunity for all people to obtain productive work and a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, and better prospects for personal development and social integration.”
3. Luc Cloutier-Villeneuve, « Taux d’emploi et revenu d’emploi des Québécoises : quels écarts entre les personnes immigrantes et non immigrantes », *Marché du travail et rémunération*, n° 27, Institut de la statistique du Québec, August 2021.
4. Lia Lévesque, « Le taux d’emploi des personnes immigrantes plus élevé que celui des natifs », *La Presse*, March 1st, 2023.
5. Marie-Ève Fournier, « Le taux de chômage des immigrants explose », *La Presse*, July 24th, 2024; Francis Halin, « Bilan emploi 2024 : “On est dans un marché du travail moins vigoureux”, selon Desjardins », *Le Journal de Montréal*, Jan. 4th, 2025.
6. Luc Cloutier-Villeneuve, « Portrait des personnes issues de minorités visibles sur le marché du travail au Québec en 2021 », *Marché du travail et rémunération*, n° 35, Institut de la statistique du Québec, July 2023.
7. Bilan démographique du Québec. Édition 2024, May 8th, 2024.
8. Jean-Marc Aveline, « Homily given at the Cathedral Basilica Notre-Dame de Québec », Sept 22nd, 2024, p. 2.
9. See, for instance : Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops, « Appeal for solidarity with the people affected by the war in Ukraine », March 10th, 2022; Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops, « The Human Person at the Heart of Food Sovereignty », May 1st, 2015; Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, « “I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me.” Pastoral letter on Welcoming Refugees », Oct. 2nd, 2015.
10. Among the many concrete and inspiring examples we know of, let us recall the work of Jesuit Jacques Couture, who was a priest-worker in Montreal, then Minister of Labor and Jobs and Minister of Immigration in the René Lévesque government. He facilitated the arrival in Quebec of refugees from Southeast Asia, Haiti, and Latin America. Capuchin Benoît Fortin also helped welcome Chilean refugees to Quebec City in the 1970s, founding the Centre Encuentro and participating in the unionization of workers at a hotel where many were employed. As for women’s religious communities, the Institut Notre-Dame du Bon-Conseil founded the *Centre social d’aide aux immigrants* (CASI) in Montreal in 1947, and in 2004, eight member communities of the UNANIMA International coalition founded the *Comité d’action contre la traite humaine interne et internationale* (CATHII).
11. Francis, « Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees », message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Jan. 14th, 2018.
12. Matthew 25:35.
13. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, « “We are aliens and transients before the Lord our God.” Pastoral Letter on Immigration and the Protection of Refugees », Jan. 15th, 2006.
14. Francis, « Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees », Jan. 14th, 2018.