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Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, applauds June 13 at the opening of the bishops' annual spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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The U.S. bishops began their annual spring assembly by condemning recent immigration policies from the Trump administration that have separated families at the U.S.-Mexico border and threatened to deny asylum for people fleeing violence.

The morning session here began with a statement, but by its end escalated to numerous bishops endorsing the idea of sending a delegation to the border to inspect the detention facilities where children are being kept and even floating the possibility of "canonical penalties" for those involved in carrying out the policies.

"The latest developments are consistent with the sort of cardiosclerosis that has begun in our country, and it concerns across-the-board life issues," said Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, who from the floor raised the idea of a bishop delegation to the border "as a sign of our pastoral concern and protest against this hardening of the American heart."

"And the invitation is to harden our hearts further," he said.

[Issuing a statement](#) in his capacity as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo set the stage by referring to "two very troubling recent developments in the area of immigration."

The policies in question were the decision announced June 11 by Attorney General Jeff Sessions that severely limits asylum seekers' ability to enter the U.S. by claiming they are fleeing domestic violence or gang-related violence. That followed the Justice Department's "zero tolerance" policy, [introduced in early May](#), for immigrants crossing illegally in the U.S. that would separate children from their families.

"At its core, asylum is an instrument to preserve the right to life. The Attorney General's recent decision elicits deep concern because it potentially strips asylum from many women who lack adequate protection. These vulnerable women will now face return to the extreme dangers of domestic violence in their home country," the

statement read.

Unless the policy is overturned, DiNardo said the decision "will erode the capacity of asylum to save lives."

On the separation of families, the cardinal said the nation's laws have the discretion to ensure families are kept intact and children not "exposed to irreparable harm and trauma."

"Families are the foundational element of our society and they must be able to stay together," DiNardo said.

"While protecting our borders is important, we can and must do better as a government, and as a society, to find other ways to ensure that safety. Separating babies from their mothers is not the answer and is immoral."

Earlier in the day, the bishops received updates on the conference's work on immigration and refugee issues from Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, and Bishop Joe Vásquez of Austin, Texas. Gomez said the pace and development on the immigration issue has picked up in the last year, recapping the situation for Dreamers, the Trump administration travel ban and other steps it has taken regarding temporary protected status for refugees.

Gomez reported that following the Justice Department's "zero tolerance" policy, 640 families were separated in the period between May 3-17, with 55 to 65 children separated each day.

During the bishops' national "[DACA call-in Day](#)" in February, more than 50,000 calls were made to Congress in support of Dreamers, persons who were brought into the U.S. illegally as children.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, though not attending the conference, issued a statement saying that "the moral challenge of immigration is mounting for the United States."

"On too many occasions our government has taken a posture and established policy which is in principle and in practice hostile to children and families who are fleeing violence, gangs, and poverty," he said, adding "The United States is now openly before the world using children as pawns to enforce a hostile immigration policy. This strategy is morally unacceptable and denies the clear danger weighing

Trump administration's immigration policies.

"I think the time is there for a prophetic statement," he said, adding that canonical penalties are there first and foremost as a means to heal.

Bishop John Stowe recommended pastoral outreach for border control agents customs workers who are struggling with enforcing policies they view as unjust.

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As part of the [Share the Journey campaign](#), launched by Pope Francis and Caritas Internationalis in September, Archbishop Paul Coakley, board chair of Catholic Relief Services, invited U.S. bishops to join in organizing and conducting prayer pilgrimages as a way of walking and bearing public witness in solidarity with migrants and refugees. The campaign has a cumulative goal of amassing 24,900 miles walked — or the equivalent of traveling once around the globe — before Nov. 13, the feast of St. Frances Cabrini.

Other initiatives of the second year of the Share the Journey campaign asks Catholics to host "encounter meals" with migrants, as well as a new aspect to address fears of migrants and immigrants.

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This story appears in the **Families Separated at the Border** feature series. [View the full series](#).