



Protecting Life, Not Just Borders

[Alberto Ares Mateos, SJ](#)

[1 October 2026](#)

[Politics](#)

In light of the recent events in Ceuta and Spain's new immigration and asylum regulations, Spanish and European society finds itself at a moral and political crossroads.

This is not merely a matter of adjusting administrative procedures or strengthening border controls. It is about deciding what kind of community we want to be, which values we wish to place at the heart of our shared life, and what message we want to send to future generations. From the perspective of the Church's Social Teaching (CST) and the Gospel, the answer is clear: migration is not a problem to be managed, but a human reality to be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated.

The Church's call for a change of perspective

Pope Leo XIV put it very clearly in his message for the 2026 World Day of Migrants and Refugees (WDMR): "An urgent change of perspective is needed: the focus of the debate must shift from the mere management of migration flows to the full and immediate protection of human rights." These words are not rhetorical; they are a concrete call to redirect public policies, place people at the centre, and prevent fear and security from becoming the sole criteria guiding action.

Leo XIV had already called for this "change of perspective" in his historic address to the Spanish Parliament on 8 June 2026, when he appealed for "a coordinated, compassionate and effective response, capable of guaranteeing protection, welcome and genuine opportunities for integration for those who migrate". Seven minutes of applause in the chamber do not erase reality: migration policies continue to prioritise control over dignity, externalisation over shared responsibility, and rejection over integration.



Ceuta as symbol and call

What happened in Ceuta at the end of July 2026 is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a symptom of a European policy that, despite its rhetoric of solidarity, continues to build invisible walls between “the sea of shipwrecked people and the sea of holidaymakers”, as Leo XIV himself denounced in Lampedusa. Once again, Ceuta is the world’s most unequal border between the European Union and Africa: a place where, in practice, it is decided whether Europe wants to be a fortress or a community, whether it wants to protect life or manage death.

From the perspective of CST, the response cannot be ambiguous. Migration is not a “threat”; it is a structural reality of our globalised world, driven by wars, inequalities, the climate crisis and a lack of opportunities. People do not migrate on a whim; they migrate because they have no other option. And when legal and safe pathways do not exist, criminal networks gain strength and routes become more dangerous. Spain’s new immigration and asylum regulations, aligned with the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, risk tightening return and asylum procedures without providing sufficient safeguards for fundamental rights.

Migrant children: an absolute priority

In this context, protecting migrant and refugee children must be an absolute priority. Leo XIV firmly reiterated this in his 2026 WDMR message: “Public and private institutions are obliged to place the protection and dignity of every child and adolescent at the centre”, promoting family reunification and preventing the trauma of separation, including forced repatriations. Unaccompanied children are “the most vulnerable among global migration flows”, and their protection cannot be subordinated to political calculations or border-management concerns.

From a Gospel perspective, this is not an option: it is a demand of the Gospel. “We are all migrants.”

CST insists that every boy and girl must be respected and valued in their cultural identity as a way of preventing situations of exclusion. This requires not only legal protection measures, but also reception policies, education, mental-health support and community accompaniment. The Church, NGOs, civic groups and local authorities have a key role to play here: they cannot replace the state, but they can point the way and demand accountability.



Safe pathways and the right not to migrate

Leo XIV has also highlighted a distinction we often avoid: the right to migrate and the right not to migrate. On the one hand, we must offer safe and legal pathways, a respectful welcome and genuine opportunities for integration. On the other, we must work to ensure that no one is forced to leave their own land by promoting peace, security, dignified living conditions, justice in the workplace and a response to the climate crisis. Both demands form part of the same social justice: we cannot protect life only when it reaches our borders; we must also protect it where it begins.

From a Gospel perspective, this is not an option: it is a demand of the Gospel. “We are all migrants,” Leo XIV said in Tenerife, reminding us that life itself is a journey and that hospitality is one of the earliest forms of Christian love. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not an abstract metaphor; it is a political and pastoral programme for rebuilding a wounded world and promoting universal fraternity, as Pope Francis told us in *Fratelli Tutti*. Asking, “Who is my neighbour?” and answering, “The person in need,” is the criterion that should guide our laws, our borders and our communities.

A migration policy with a soul

Spain’s new immigration and asylum regulations cannot be merely an administrative procedure. They must be an opportunity to incorporate into law what CST and the Gospel have been saying for years. This means:

- Guaranteeing access to fair, swift asylum procedures with appropriate safeguards, especially for children, victims of trafficking and people in vulnerable situations.
- Expanding and diversifying legal entry pathways, including humanitarian visas, resettlement and community sponsorship schemes.
- Promoting genuine integration through access to housing, employment, education, healthcare and community participation, while avoiding ghettos and marginalisation.
- Tackling the structural causes of forced migration through development cooperation, climate justice, the fight against corruption and support for fragile states.
- Fostering a culture of encounter and hospitality that is not afraid of plurality and does not exploit fear for electoral purposes.



Ceuta, the Canary Islands and Lampedusa: one shared cry

On 2 August, Leo XIV said: “I continue to follow the alarming situation in Ceuta with concern, asking God, through the intercession of Our Lady of Africa, that solutions of peace, stability and justice may be found.” Ceuta, the Canary Islands and Lampedusa are not isolated points on a map; they form part of one shared cry. In all these places, the Pope has denounced indifference, called the criminal networks to conversion and urged us to “think differently”. Migration policy cannot be the sole concern of ministers and secretaries of state. It is the responsibility of society as a whole: local Churches, trade unions, businesses, universities, neighbourhoods and everyone else.

Conclusion: a civilisation of love

Ultimately, the question is not “How many migrants can we accept?” but “What kind of humanity do we want to build?” Leo XIV said in Tenerife that we must pass on “the heritage of a civilisation of love”. This is not naïveté; it is Gospel realism. Without love, justice and compassion, no migration policy will be sustainable. Ceuta challenges us: we cannot continue to look the other way. The lives of migrants are not bargaining chips; they are sacred. And Europe, Spain, the Church and every one of us have a responsibility to demonstrate this through our actions, not merely our words.

References



JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

EUROPE

Ares, A., Gómez, J., & de la Fuente, M. C. (2025). *Ser puerta abierta: La hospitalidad en el corazón de la espiritualidad*. Sal Terrae, Santander.

Francis. (2020). *Encyclical letter Fratelli Tutti: On fraternity and social friendship*. Vatican.

JRS Europe. (2026, 26 June). *JRS Europe raises concerns over the EU Returns Regulation*, Brussels.

Leo XIV. (2026, 12 June). *Meeting with migrants at the “Las Raíces” Centre*, Tenerife, Spain.

Leo XIV. (2026, 14 August). *Message for the 112th World Day of Migrants and Refugees*. Vatican City.

Leo XIV. (2026, 4 July). *Homily, “Arena” Sports Ground*, Salina, Lampedusa, Italy.

Leo XIV. (2026, 8 June). *Meeting with members of the Spanish Parliament, Congress of Deputies*, Madrid, Spain.

Noticias Obreras. (2026, 14 August). [Leo XIV calls for a “coordinated, compassionate and effective” response for migrant children.](#)