



## **Florida Bishops Ask President Bush To Release Haitian Detainees**

**January 8, 2003**

The Bishops of Florida express our escalating and grave concern to our President, George W. Bush, over the plight of Haitian migrants who recently landed on our shores. We hear the plea of our brothers and sisters in Christ seeking justice, and we call on President Bush to order the immediate release of these detained Haitian asylum seekers.

The Gospel tells us that a human being's dignity and the rights conferred from that dignity are God-given and therefore irrevocable. The right to a life of security and safety, free from the violence of political repression, is essential to realize this dignity.

On October 29, 2002, a teetering vessel from Haiti overloaded with the souls of hundreds approached our land and ran aground on our shores. The mothers who lowered children clad in their Sunday best into the murky waters below were driven by the desire of every mother – to see her children safe, secure and able to realize their dignity as full human persons. For more than two months now, these 228 Haitian asylum seekers have suffered the humiliation of continued detention, separated from their awaiting families and community sponsors.

When our government seeks to criminalize the flight of these men, women and children who fled political repression, we do not strike a blow only against refugees, but against our own fundamental belief in the strength of justice, family, nation and God, beliefs upon which our nation was founded.

The continued detention and denial of adequate and appropriate access to legal representation is both indefensible and inequitable. The accelerated hearing schedule dictated by the Executive Office of Immigration Review denies detainees the fundamental due process right to adequate legal counsel as guaranteed to all who set foot in our nation.

The federal government, through the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, has failed to articulate a compelling moral or security-based rationale for the continued detention of those who seek only freedom for themselves and their children from political persecution and human rights violations in Haiti.

As we mark the U.S. Catholic Church's observance of National Migration Week, we are reminded once again that we are a nation based on a delicate balance of laws and faith. We call on President Bush to apply the same standard set for all others who seek political asylum to the detained Haitians, and their children as well. We also urge Governor Jeb Bush and our federal and state legislators to contact the President, asking that he immediately release these detainees.

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