



In Pulpits and Pews, Catholic Churches Urge Compassion for Immigrants

Immigration was on the minds of priests and parishioners following a letter from the nation's Catholic bishops decrying how immigrants are being treated.

Rev. Alex Santora delivered a homily about immigration and Christianity at the Church of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph in Hoboken, N.J., on Sunday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



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Rev. Alex Santora ascended to the pulpit of the Church of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph, looked out at the people gathered beneath stained glass and soaring gothic columns that were created largely by Irish immigrants in the 19th century, and told a story of a local immigrant in modern times.

The man came from Cuba more than 40 years ago, started a business and raised a family. But he had gotten into some minor legal trouble in the 1980s. And this year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement came for him. He had to close his business, lay off his workers, and leave the country.

“In the last 10 months, we’re hearing about a lot of pain, people whose lives are abandoned and ruined, and not just a few,” Father Santora told parishioners at the church in Hoboken, N.J., during Mass on Saturday evening.

In humble rural churches and tall urban cathedrals across the country this weekend, Catholic priests and parishioners reflected on the Trump administration’s sweeping immigration crackdown. Some said that the roundup of hundreds of thousands of people, which has disproportionately affected Catholic congregations full of immigrants, goes against Christian teachings.

Just a few miles from Our Lady of Grace, said Father Santora, about 1,000 immigrants were being held in a detention center. “This is not what Jesus Christ would want,” he told his flock. “It’s immoral.”

The Trump administration says that its immigration enforcement campaign will break deportation records by the end of the year. Teams of agents, often using military-style equipment, have raided factories, construction sites and apartment blocks and detained people at schools, churches and big-box stores.

The Department of Homeland Security said in late October that it had deported 527,000 “illegal aliens” this year and pushed another 1.6 million to leave the country voluntarily. A record 66,000 immigrants were in federal detention, according to the agency. Agency spokeswoman Tricia McLaughlin said in October, “This is just the beginning.”

As the administration has stepped up its deportation efforts, though, the Catholic Church has gotten louder in its criticism. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Wednesday issued a special message — the first since 2013 — opposing what it called the “indiscriminate mass deportation of people.”

“We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants,” the bishops wrote. “We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care.”

At the end of their message, they said, “We pray for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement.”

The Department of Homeland Security said it was focused on “removing the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens from American communities, including murderers, rapists, pedophiles, drug dealers, and more.”

The agency said that 70 percent of arrests were of immigrants charged with or convicted of a crime in the United States. But an analysis of federal data by The New York Times shows that fewer than 40 percent had a criminal conviction, and only about 8 percent had been convicted of a violent crime.



Parishioners worship at the Church of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

In Hoboken, Father Santora pointed around the church, speaking about how Our Lady of Grace was built by immigrants more than a century ago.

“Their nickels, dimes and quarters built this church. They employed all the people who designed, engineered, constructed and furnished it,” he said.

“We know that immigrants have built our country, and they fuel our economy,” he added.

At the Church of St. Mary in nearby Rutherford, Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, 73, was presiding over a Sunday afternoon Mass after returning from the U.S. Council of Bishops meeting. After Mass, he described the moment when the bishops agreed to the content of their letter about the immigration crisis as the

greatest show of unanimity he'd ever seen in the body. "And when the final vote count was flashed up on the screen in the meeting hall, people spontaneously stood up and applauded," he said.

"We're concerned about what we see going on in the country," the cardinal added. "While we certainly do not deny the obligation of a state to regulate its borders, everyone from the Holy Father and several Holy Fathers down have made it quite clear that having laws isn't enough. They have to be based on compassion and justice."

Across the Hudson River in Manhattan, at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Manhattan, Rev. Kenneth Boller also addressed the bishops' letter during Mass.

"The church is like a mother. When the world sees threats, she sees children. When walls are built, she builds bridges," Father Boller said. "She knows that her proclamation in the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself."

Other churches chose not to address the topic directly on Sunday. Still, some parishioners said they welcomed the bishops' strong statement.

Charlotte Lesslie, 20, attended Mass with her parents at St. Andrew Catholic Church, in Clemson, S.C.

"I felt like it was good stating just that every human being deserves dignity and deserves love and deserves to be treated like they were made in the image and likeness of our Lord," she said. "They weren't saying that any one person is bad, but just that maybe some of the things that are going on aren't really what is asked of us as people, as Christians."

At St. Thomas Mission in Brownsville, Texas, Rev. Joel Flores did not directly mention the letter. But he said in an interview before Mass that there was nothing new in the bishops' statement about immigration, adding, "It's a statement the church has been making since its conception."

"Any institution which does something against the value of human life is worthy of the church making a statement," Father Flores said.

Deportations have put his parish in the Rio Grande Valley, which has a high number of Spanish-speaking immigrants, on edge. Father Flores said there has been a significant drop in the number of people attending Mass in recent months because parishioners fear they will be picked up by federal agents.

"There's a system that is deporting or potentially deporting people indiscriminately," he said. "People are asking questions like, why me, or why them, or am I next?"

Robert Chiarito, Sarah Goodman, Jesse Klein and Alison Hill contributed to this report.

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