News

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, speaks at USCCB meeting.

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, speaks during a Nov. 13 session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. Seitz, the bishops' migration chair, said the U.S. church will try to reshape the national narrative on migration to one that is more welcoming. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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During their annual fall meeting in Baltimore, some bishops who minister to migrants and refugees voiced concern about what Donald Trump's second presidential term will mean for immigration policy. Others urged caution, saying it's too early to tell what will happen.

But after a Nov. 13 report on immigration from El Paso’s Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, some prelates, including Seattle's Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, said Trump's campaign caused damage because of its "incredible negative rhetoric" against immigrants.

Trump's 2024 presidential campaign painted Venezuelans and other migrants as criminals, accused Haitian refugees of eating pets in Ohio and claimed that immigrants are to blame for the rising costs of housing.

Vowing to end what he called a landscape of misery caused by migrants, Trump promised mass deportations, putting a stop to short-term immigration programs such as humanitarian parole and instituting large-scale detention centers.

That has caused "a lot of fear in our people," Elizondo said during the U.S. bishops annual meeting Nov. 11-14.

"I'm praying that things will calm down and that there will be some discussion and dialogue to tone that down and not to demonize [migrants] just because they came from another country," Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Daniel Flores told the National Catholic Reporter Nov. 13. "Automatically, that says they shouldn't be here. Many people are here because they have a legal status … they have been given a chance to make an asylum claim, and that's through a legal process."

> '[Bishops] must speak with one voice on this issue, consistently and intentionally … especially given the experience of so many Catholic immigrants in generations gone by.'
> —Bishop Mark Seitz
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Political rhetoric, characterizing people in negative ways is dangerous, Seitz added.

"Words do have power and words can harm people," he said.

In 2019, Seitz' diocese tended to victims and survivors of a mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart store, where a 21-year-old gunman targeting Latinos opened fire, killing 23 and injuring more two dozen people after leaving behind an anti-immigrant "manifesto."

"We certainly did see it in 2019, the way that words inflamed the heart of a person who perhaps wasn't very balanced and acted, saw it as a call to action, to violent action," Seitz told NCR. "There are no immigrants in this country who don't live with that fear right now."

Beyond words, prelates are looking at possible immigration policies, Seitz said, but it remains to be seen what will change and how fast.

Flores agreed.

"We have to be a voice that is calm and clear about the reality of the situation, and the humanity and how it's affected by the laws we enact and so forth," Flores told NCR. "But it's true, we don't know yet what they're going to do … we're just thinking about how we would respond in different situations, but we don't prejudge what the decisions are."

Jose Francisco from Honduras leads his 8-year-old daughter, Zuabelin, by the hand Nov. 22, 2

Jose Francisco from Honduras leads his 8-year-old daughter, Zuabelin, by the hand Nov. 22, 2021, as they take part in a caravan near Villa Mapastepec, Mexico, and head to the U.S. border. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

Though the Diocese of Yakima, Washington, is not near the southern border, Bishop Joseph Tyson tends to a large population of itinerant agricultural workers there, including many immigrants who may be affected by upcoming changes. So far, "we're just not getting much of a reaction" from them on the election, he told NCR.

Of course, some people worry about being deported, he said, but their main worry at the moment is economic. Some fear being able to hold down a job and making enough to survive because of inflation, he said.

"Fuel and pesticides, farm supplies went up, but fruit commodity prices did not. There are many people that are more worried about that than being deported," he said.

But his diocese is preparing as best as it can for immigration policy changes and actions that could come as the new administration begins in January. The diocese provides "Know Your Rights" resources on its website and has information in English and Spanish on how families can prepare in case of deportation. It also provides downloadable affidavits with instructions about who can care for a family's children in case parents are detained.

Unlike the fear immigrant communities showed during the first Trump administration, this time it's different and more "complex," Tyson said, because economic fears are stronger among those vulnerable communities.

"But we will see what happens in January," he said.

And though the church has not had its work with migrants curtailed, pastors like Flores are concerned "that in some future, there might be efforts to restrict what has always been the traditional mission of the church in caring for the homeless, caring for people who are hungry or thirsty."

Politicians in his state of Texas have scrutinized organizations that help migrants, accusing some of them of human trafficking in an attempt to shut down places that shelter and feed newcomers.

The church, in carrying out its mission, has operated in a way that "when somebody comes and says, ‘I need something to eat’ or 'I'm hungry,’ we don't ask them what papers they have, because the Gospel requires a response to the person, and that that freedom has been traditionally respected," Flores said.

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That's part of what it means to have freedom of religion, he added.

"We haven't had a curtailing of our activities, but I'm concerned that at some point in the future, there might be an attempt to do that," he said. "Religion is not just what you do inside church. Religion also has to do with our mission. That's why we have hospitals and we have certain protections. Some of our great institutions, like Catholic Charities, serve the poor."

But under any administration, there are always such concerns, he said, citing unsuccessful efforts by the government to dictate what Catholic hospitals can and can't do.

As Seitz, the bishops' migration chair, finishes the last of a three-year appointment to the position dealing with newcomers to the U.S., he told bishops the U.S. church will try to reshape the national narrative on migration from one that is often suspicious and adversarial to newly arriving immigrants, to one that is more welcoming and responsive to their needs. Bishops and priests are particularly important in that effort, he said.

"Recent public discourse, including inflammatory comments from political leaders, has fueled a troubling rise in nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment across our nation," he said in his address to the bishops.

Given the recent election and some of the policy proposals the incoming administration has suggested, it is essential that bishops concentrate on forming Catholics to embody and carry out church teaching on the issue of immigration, he added.

"[Bishops] must speak with one voice on this issue, consistently and intentionally, and proceed in solidarity with our immigrant brothers and sisters, especially given the experience of so many Catholic immigrants in generations gone by," he said. "The success of any education effort depends on active engagement of bishops who shepherd and teach the faithful, priests who function as facilitators of parish life and seminarians who are future leaders in the church."

In a statement released Nov. 14, Seitz, along with USCCB President Archbishop Timothy Broglio and Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, chairman of the board for Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., repeated what other prelates have affirmed to those who say the safety of people in the U.S. must be a priority.

"We hope that our country can develop an effective asylum system for those fleeing persecution and an immigration system that keeps our borders safe and secure, with enforcement policies that focus on those who present risks and dangers to society, particularly efforts to reduce gang activity, stem the flow of drugs, and end human trafficking," the statement said.

It also stressed that migrants' dignity and contributions must be observed, saying: "The United States should have an immigration system that protects vulnerable migrants and their families, many of whom have already been victimized by criminal actors."

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