News



After attending Mass, people leave San Xavier del Bac Mission in Pima County, Ariz., outside Tucson, May 28, 2023. Ten state faith leaders — including Catholic Bishops Edward J. Weisenburger of Tucson and John P. Dolan of Phoenix — wrote an op-ed column published Dec. 28, 2024, in the Arizona Republic, denouncing reported proposals to allow immigration raids on churches, houses of worship, hospitals, schools and other locations currently deemed off-limits due to their sensitive nature once President-elect Donald Trump takes office. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



Kimberley Heatherington

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Phoenix — December 31, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The expectation that President-elect Donald J. Trump's incoming administration will revoke the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's long-standing policy restricting the arrest of unauthorized immigrants at or near houses of worship has led faith leaders to protest what they say represents an impending threat to religious freedom.

Called a "sensitive locations" ban, the policy also stops the arrest of these immigrants at or near hospitals, schools, and even funerals and weddings.

On Dec. 28, 10 Arizona faith leaders — including Catholic Bishops Edward J. Weisenburger of Tucson and John P. Dolan of Phoenix — put their concerns in writing in an op-ed column published in the Arizona Republic, the state's largest newspaper.

"Of special concern to us are reported methods of detention and deportation that might include raids on churches, houses of worship, hospitals, schools and other locations associated with meeting basic human needs," the column read in part. "We find it unacceptable that undocumented persons might be intimidated from going to a church and thereby exercising their right to the practice of religion."

In further comments emailed to OSV News Dec. 30, Weisenburger said, "The 10 signatory Arizona bishops — or equivalent faith leaders — acknowledge our nation's right to humane and legal immigration enforcement. However, we also acknowledge that immigration enforcement efforts that violate basic human rights, or our nation's Constitution, must not be undertaken or threatened."

"Our nation's founders recognized the free and unimpeded exercise of religion as a foundation upon which a Great Democracy would be built," he continued. "Moreover, a host of international entities acknowledges that freedom of religion is a basic human right. Any attempted arrests at or near sensitive locations such as churches or schools would be an infringement not only on that basic human right of undocumented persons, but also would entail a violation of the rights of our own citizens."

Weisenburger cited constitutional privileges — certain rights the U.S. Supreme Court has maintained apply to everyone living in America, whether U.S.-born, naturalized, or not.

"Our churches teach that our doors must be open to all who wish to embrace our religious practices — an essential element of our constitutional right to the free exercise of religion," he explained. "To impede, or threaten to impede, our brothers and sisters from worshipping with us based solely upon their immigration status would entail a government interference in our own citizen's religious practice, preventing our members from fulfilling their God-given mission."

Weisenburger stressed the human dignity of both migrants and citizens.

"It is our hope that all those associated with immigration enforcement on the federal, state, or local levels will acknowledge the human dignity of those they encounter, observe their basic human rights, and undertake no efforts that violate the rights of United States citizens to the free exercise of our teachings and deeply-held religious beliefs."

Advertisement

Throughout his campaign, Trump repeatedly promised to conduct the "largest deportation operation in American history," aimed at removing the approximately 11 million unauthorized immigrants thought to currently reside in the United States.

Tom Homan was named to the role by Trump Nov. 11 and will not require Senate confirmation. He has endorsed deportation tactics such as the detention or separation of families with U.S. citizen children, aggressive enforcement of immigration laws in sanctuary cities, the possible prosecution of officials who

"knowingly harbor" migrants in the country without legal authorization, and the withholding of federal funds from states that refuse to cooperate.

Homan has also proposed the deputization of local and military forces to apprehend these migrants, as well as the use of military bases to detain them and military planes to transport them out of the country.

Homan characterized such operations as a years-long project with "no price tag."

"I applaud the Arizona bishops for strongly speaking out against a mass deportation policy and highlighting the potential violations of human dignity and religious freedom arising from it," said J. Kevin Appleby, senior director of International Migration Policy at the Center for Migration Studies of New York and former director of migration policy and public affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops from 1998-2016.

"Should the Trump administration follow through with its threats, parishes and Catholic agencies could become targets for immigration enforcement, infringing upon the religious practice of all Catholics, not just that of the undocumented," Appleby told OSV News.

Dylan Corbett — founder and executive director of the Hope Border Institute, a faith-based research, advocacy and humanitarian action organization at the U.S.-Mexico border — agreed.

"The policies which recognize churches, schools and hospitals as places where immigration enforcement should not happen are longstanding and bipartisan," he said. "These are places where people are often at their most vulnerable — turning to the church, worshipping God, picking children up at school and seeking out medical attention."

The "sensitive locations" policy dates from 2011, and continued during the first Trump administration and the Biden administration, which issued further guidance in 2021, expanding areas that "require special protection." ICE agents have, however, been allowed exceptions for national security or terror issues, the arrest of dangerous felons, and other special criminal considerations.

"Bishops and faith leaders across the country are right to point out the religious liberty implications, and our Catholic institutions need to prepare," warned Corbett.

"Our freedom to be the body of Christ is at stake — to be a place of welcome and healing, to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all persons, and to be a sign of reconciliation and mercy in a broken society."

He also anticipates the coming months could be a defining era for the church's witness.

"As the Catholic Church in the United States, we are entering a unique moral moment," Corbett predicted, "when we will be called to oppose counterproductive and unjust deportation policies which indiscriminately target our fellow parishioners, the students in our Catholic schools, and those who receive services from our Catholic Charities agencies."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.