Opinion
Guest Voices



Agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detain a man after conducting a raid at the Cedar Run apartment complex in Denver Feb. 5, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)



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The church remembers Christ's suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus in a spiritual and sacramental way during Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, but some people actually experience the Passion in a tangible and personal way in their very lives. Among them are members of the immigrant and refugee communities today.

Each day this situation is getting worse and more ominous. For weeks now, the federal government has pursued a "shock and awe" campaign of aggressive threats and highly visible operations of questionable legality that go far beyond mere immigration "enforcement."

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Cardinal Robert McElroy has bluntly called this unfolding misery and injustice a "war of fear and terror," and it is. In fact, it could be said that "this war is Christ's Passion in us," which is how spiritual author Caryll Houselander described the experience of the English people during World War II in her book, *This War is the Passion*. And as with Jesus in the Garden and after his arrest, this suffering includes not only the abuse inflicted upon migrants and refugees by the government, but the lack of noticeable support by people they considered to be friends.

Many fear this crisis will lead only to ruin, but there is one thing in our lives that is not endangered and in which we can take hope — and that is the ongoing presence of Jesus the Risen Lord among us. In that knowledge, Houselander added in her book, "we can face the war in His spirit." This includes offering up these trials and worries to our Redeemer and also completing in ourselves what is lacking in his afflictions, as St. Paul did (Col 1:24). In the Gospel mystery of human suffering, where Jesus, the crucified one, comes to meet us and takes our adversity upon himself, "We can carry our share of the Cross as a loving work for each other to help our common redemption," urged Houselander.

Yet, while redemptive suffering is a grace, it would be better still if these injustices and infamies did not happen at all. This is why we need to speak up as St. Óscar Romero did, and as McElroy emphasized at a recent information session on this current crisis for parish and ministerial leaders. We must stand with those at risk, his eminence said, and we cannot let the dark side of anti-immigrant animus take hold.

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Tragically, this onslaught is instead being met with silence by many — or even approval. To those of you who are silent or think this does not involve you, to those of you who are not troubled by this — or worse, who applaud it — particularly those who are Catholic, I ask you: *Do you not see the suffering of your neighbors? Do you not realize the pain and misery and very real fear and anxiety these unjust government operations and policies are causing? Is your conscience not disturbed? How can you stay quiet?* In the final teaching of his public ministry, Jesus warned that we will be judged on how we respond to others in distress (Mt 25:41-46).

These disturbing actions in violation of fundamental human rights and dignity are not only being taken against undocumented persons, gang members, and those who have committed violent crimes, but against peaceful and productive migrants and refugees across the board — which also negatively impacts their resident family members, some of whom are U.S. citizens — and against organizations like the Catholic Church that assist them. It seems that no one is safe now from arbitrary nullification of his or her protected status, visa or green card. This has left many terrified that they or their loved ones might be seized and disappear without warning.

For example, the protected status of refugees and others granted asylum has been arbitrarily terminated without any wrongdoing on their part. Visa-holders and permanent residents have had their legal authorizations revoked and then been grabbed off the street by masked government agents, held incommunicado without access to their attorneys, and imprisoned pending deportation. University scholars and others have also been refused entry or detained at the border after traveling abroad. Even U.S. citizens are viewed with suspicion or subjected to ethnic profiling based entirely on how they look or speak. Those who are naturalized citizens might be wondering if they will be targeted next, whether some pretext might be contrived for secret revocation of their naturalization.



Protesters opposing possible Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in public schools chant outside the State Department of Education in Oklahoma City Jan. 28, 2025, during their monthly board meeting. (OSV News/Reuters/Nick Oxford)

The video of a student being accosted by masked agents after her visa was revoked without notice — apparently because of an op-ed she co-wrote years ago — is horrifying. Most egregiously, the government has now claimed the authority to unilaterally seize certain people based on mere suspicion, or because of their tattoos, and send them to a prison in El Salvador accused of human rights abuses — all without review by a court to even determine their identity. The government admits some have been wrongfully deported, but officials are fighting attempts to right these wrongs.

More than a few natural-born Americans are saying they do not recognize their country anymore, but many of us from other lands recognize all too well the terror of people being snatched by secret police and disappeared. We left our former countries precisely to get away from it. Yet, too many people are still remaining

silent, perhaps out of fear, forgetting that the Holy Spirit gives us the grace of fortitude to boldly speak out for good.

When I was growing up in El Salvador, there was a man who was not afraid to speak out. His name was Óscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador. It seems to me that we need more Óscar Romeros today. We need everyone of good will to follow his lead and demand that the government respect human dignity.

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In his last Sunday homily on the day before he was killed, St. Óscar Romero made a special appeal to government agents: "It is time now for you to reclaim your conscience and to obey your conscience rather than the command to sin," he said. "We want the government to understand well that the reforms are worth nothing if they are stained with so much blood. In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise up each day more tumultuously toward heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!"

I urge government officers and support staff in the present situation to heed these words which echo through history. It is time now for *you* to reclaim your conscience. What you are doing is worth nothing if it is stained with unjust cruelty. That is not what America stands for. You too can *and should* speak out against this terror and infliction of suffering on people. You can refuse to be involved in oppression and these grievous assaults on human rights and dignity.

True, if you do, there may be adverse personal consequences. Óscar Romero certainly paid a price for speaking against the state of siege in his country. It might even mean leaving your job, but that is better than being complicit with evil, and it will lead to something even greater. As this holy man said in his last words before his martyrdom, "If we have imbued our work with a sense of great faith, love of God, and hope for humanity, then all our endeavors will lead to the splendid crown that is the sure reward for the work of sowing truth, justice, love, and goodness on earth."

This column originally appeared on the websites of the Catholic Standard and El Pregonero newspapers of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and is used with permission.

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