News



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, gives the 2025 Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture April 22 at Loyola University Chicago. His topic was "Image and Likenesses: Immigration, Dignity, and the Soul of America." (Courtesy of Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage/Loyola University Chicago)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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A U.S. bishop who has been critical of the Trump administration's immigration policies said he expects repercussions against the church for being outspoken in defense of migrants.

"I do expect — you can mark my words — that we're going to see a challenge to our tax-exempt status if we continue to speak on this issue or anything else that is contrary to actions of this administration," Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, said during a recent talk at Loyola University Chicago.

Seitz made his remarks before the election of Pope Leo XIV, who also has been outspoken about the rights of immigrants.

In his April 22 presentation, he also said the U.S. bishops' conference had "no choice" to end their resettlement of refugees after the Trump administration halted federal funding for such programs, a move Seitz called "a step in the direction of a government washing its hands of its responsibility to steward the common good by supporting the vulnerable."

Still, the church has a mandate to preach the Gospel and speak out against mass deportations and other inhumane treatment of migrants, Seitz said.



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, gives the 2025 Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture April 22 at Loyola University Chicago. (Courtesy of Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage/Loyola University Chicago)

"In the social tinderbox in which we find ourselves as a country right now, there must be a credible response of faith," said Seitz, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration. "Our Christian faith must make a difference, capable of generating an alternate history to the dystopian one that is presently being enacted."

Seitz's talk, "Images and Likenesses: Immigration, Dignity, and the Soul of America," was the 2025 Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture, cosponsored by Loyola's Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage and Commonweal magazine.

The bishop did not mince words. "To state it clearly, the actions which I have described to close the border to the vulnerable, to deprive hundreds of thousands of persons of legal status, to broaden the state of exception and to deny due process,

and to move in the direction of mass deportations, are all morally indefensible from a Catholic perspective," he said.

The Trump administration's reversal of limits to immigration enforcement in so-called "sensitive locations," including churches, schools, community centers and hospitals, is especially symbolic, Seitz said, because it is "meant to deliver a message that even bedrock principles and norms that ensure the integrity of the polity, including deference to the sacred, the education of children, and the pursuit of health, will be sacrificed to the politics of immigration."



Attendees listen as Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, gives the 2025 Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture April 22 at Loyola University Chicago. (Courtesy of Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage/Loyola University Chicago)

He also decried "the dystopian rhetoric and sharp attitude, the unapologetic belligerence towards neighboring states in the region, the elevation of self-interest as the criterion of legitimacy and the disregard for the rule of law and due process."

Although current political rhetoric links immigrants with criminality, Seitz said migrants do not represent a threat to the country's rule of law. "The vast majority of immigrants would not hesitate to regularize their situation lawfully were it possible," he said. "It is the fault of lawmakers unable or unwilling to establish sane and lawful mechanisms to manage migration, in our country, at the border and abroad."

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Although the border is presented in the media in binary terms, the reality on the ground is much more fluid, Seitz said, with people crossing every day to work, visit family, trade and worship. "Some of our Catholic schools might have to close if students from Ciudad Juarez, our sister city in Mexico, weren't able to cross," he said.

"What we have learned over the centuries is that migration need not be a threatening reality, but an enriching reality, when the movement of people is embraced conscientiously as an opportunity for human encounter," he said, adding that this is the "culture of encounter" that Pope Francis often spoke about.

Seitz said the more than 50,000 undocumented persons in his diocese are part of his community. "They, too, are part of us, for we were once them. The many immigrants who are dying in the desert are part of my community and are also worthy of the Lord's peace and salvation," he said. "A campaign of mass deportations would represent a moral crisis in my diocese, and a deeply social crisis, one which would tear at the heart of human fraternity. It would tear at the heart of who we are."



El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz listens to a question from an audience member April 22 at Loyola University Chicago. (Courtesy of Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage/Loyola University Chicago)

The Trump administration's moves against immigrants also raise questions about the health of our democracy, Seitz said. "On a fundamental level, these are signs that we are losing the story of who we are as a country," he said. "This is a crisis of narrative. Are we no longer a country of immigrants? Are we no longer a country that values the dignity of the human person, individual liberties and with a healthy regard for checks and balances?"

In response, the church must protect the vulnerable, including migrants in their parishes. Seitz asked every diocese to put together a plan to ensure that immigrants understand their rights and have access to legal services to protect them from deportation.

Over the long term, the church needs to return to its evangelical mission, to be a witness. "Public argument is important," he said. "And what the Holy Father taught us is that perhaps even more fundamental is the need to witness to the Gospel, simply, credibly and with integrity. During his pontificate, Pope Francis did that, and he continued to do it even during the last weeks and days of his life, with vulnerability, with his own body."

Christians' solidarity must be public and embodied, he said.

"People need to see Jesus, visible and concrete. They need to feel his compassion. In the wasteland of this frightening political moment, when everything is reduced to manipulable appearance, they need to see concrete, credible reasons for hope."

NCR senior correspondent Heidi Schlumpf is currently a part-time faculty member at Loyola University Chicago.

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