News




Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers detain a man stopped by Tennessee Highway Patrol at a gas station in South Nashville as he could not produce any alternative identification proof other than his expired driving license, during an operation conducted by ICE along with THP to detain noncitizens across the city of Nashville, Tenn., May 10, 2025. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Seth Herald)

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Amid an immigration enforcement operation in Nashville, Tennessee, that has emptied the pews at several Spanish-speaking parishes, the Diocese of Nashville is reminding faithful that they are not required to attend Sunday Mass if they fear for their well-being according to the church's own teaching and canon law.

That message, disseminated to diocesan parishes, comes amid a joint operation between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Tennessee Highway Patrol that has so far resulted in 196 arrests in the area.

The sweep is being carried out under ICE's 287(g) program, referencing a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act that authorizes ICE to delegate certain enforcement actions — such as identification and arrest — to state and local law enforcement, who work under ICE oversight. Tennessee Highway Patrol officers have been conducting traffic stops to identify and detain persons in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, with dozens of individuals later transported by ICE to a federal immigration detention center in Louisiana for processing.

The Trump administration has pledged to enforce mass deportations of immigrants living in the U.S. without legal permission, a policy central to President Donald Trump's election campaign.

On Jan. 20, Trump's first day back in office, his administration rescinded a Department of Homeland Security policy limiting where migrant arrests could happen. Its new policy said field agents using "common sense" and "discretion" can conduct immigration enforcement operations at houses of worship without a supervisor's approval.

In an email to OSV News, Rick Musacchio, the executive director of the Tennessee Catholic Conference, provided a copy of the diocese's statement regarding Mass attendance.

"In response to the recent immigration enforcement activities in the Nashville area, many of those in our diocese are concerned about possibly being confronted or detained while attending Mass or other parish events," the statement said. "Our churches remain open to welcome and serve our parish communities, but no Catholic is obligated to attend Mass on Sunday if doing so puts their safety at risk."

Speaking on behalf of the Nashville Diocese, Musacchio told OSV News by phone that so far, he is aware of "one member of one of our parishes being detained." But he added, "One of the issues is it's been very difficult to determine actually who has been arrested or detained."

"Sunday Mass attendance at both of our major, primarily Spanish-speaking parishes was down about 50%" due to ICE's operation, he said.

The pastor of one of the affected parishes "told me the half that was here" in church was "very, very sad," said Musacchio.

Typically, those two largely Spanish-language parishes are "packed to the gills," he said, not only for Sunday Mass, but "on many evenings of the week."

The ICE operation has drawn a public outcry, including from Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell, who has called on the agency to disclose a full list of names and charges for the 196 arrested. O'Connell stressed that municipal law enforcement has not been involved in the operation.

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In a media release, the Department of Homeland Security — which denounced O'Connell as "a pro-open borders politician" — claimed that of the 196 detainees, "95 had prior criminal convictions and pending criminal charges and 31 were previously removed individuals who reentered the U.S. illegally, a felony offense under federal law."

DHS provided the names of only five individuals arrested during the operation.

Musacchio said that Mass attendance at the Spanish parishes declined as ICE and the state highway patrol operation ramped up.

He noted that while most of the traffic stops have occurred at night, "people are aware that they can happen at any time."

"They're not directly targeting our parishes," Musacchio said. "But there is very heavy, unusually heavy police activity in the areas around our parishes."

The Spanish-speaking community in the diocese has grown over the past decade, thanks to thriving construction, agriculture and hospitality sectors, he said.

"We have Spanish-language Masses in 26 of our 60 parishes," said Musacchio.

The Nashville Diocese's message to parishes is not a dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation, but reflects the church's own teaching and canon law about the impact of serious circumstances on a person's ability to attend Mass.

"That point exists in canon law and the catechism, and any Catholic can always make the individual determination that local conditions create the dangers," Musacchio told OSV News, emphasizing the chancery's canonists carefully worked on the message.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin."

The catechism specifies that when one's participation in the Eucharist is made impossible, the church recommends the faithful "engage in prayer for an appropriate amount of time personally or in a family or, as occasion offers, in groups of families."

The catechism's teaching is reinforced by Canon 1248, which notes that "participation in the Eucharistic celebration" can become "impossible because of the absence of a sacred minister or for another grave cause." That canon likewise states the faithful are "strongly recommended" to take part in a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word at a parish church or other sacred place, if possible, or devote themselves to prayer alone, in families or with a group.

WIth its message, the Nashville Diocese aims to help pastors "counsel our flock ... that any individual Catholic can determine it's too dangerous to go to Mass for any reason, and should not feel obligated to go to Mass because of

the Sunday obligation" under such conditions, said Musacchio.

"We don't object to reasonable enforcement of (prosecuting) criminal activities or even cooperating with the immigration process," Musacchio said. "But it really must be done in a humane and just manner. And what we have seen here in Nashville has created a tremendous amount of fear within our community — even among Latinos who are citizens."

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