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Fr. George Salzmann, a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and graduate chaplain at the Harvard Catholic Center, is seen in this undated photo outside St. Paul's Parish in Cambridge, Mass., the parish that serves Harvard University's Catholic community. (OSV News/Harvard Catholic Center)

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As Harvard University battles a Trump administration ban on international students, the head of the school's Catholic chaplaincy has a message for those affected.

"Jesus says, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled.' The Lord is always there for them. The church is always there for them," Fr. William Kelly, senior chaplain of the Harvard Catholic Center, told OSV News. "And regardless of what else happens, those two things are what, in the final run, are the most important things."

But Harvard's chaplain noted an additional consequence: Donald Trump's ban on international students would also limit the center's missionary impact beyond the U.S. borders.

Kelly spoke with OSV News May 24, a day after U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs in Boston temporarily blocked the Trump administration's decision to revoke Harvard's certification for the federal Student and Exchange Visitor Program.

The program allows foreign students and exchange visitors to study as what the government calls "nonimmigrant" students at U.S. schools or programs certified by the Department of Homeland Security. Students and exchange visitors must first be accepted by their school or program of choice before applying for a visa.

In a May 22 announcement, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem said the administration "is holding Harvard accountable for fostering violence, antisemitism, and coordinating with the Chinese Communist Party on its campus."

"It is a privilege, not a right, for universities to enroll foreign students and benefit from their higher tuition payments to help pad their multibillion-dollar endowments," Noem said. "Harvard had plenty of opportunity to do the right thing. It refused."

The DHS announcement also stated that Harvard "can no longer enroll foreign students and existing foreign students must transfer or lose their legal status."

The university filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration May 23, calling the revocation "a blatant violation of the First Amendment, the Due Process Clause, and the Administrative Procedure Act."

"With the stroke of a pen, the government has sought to erase a quarter of Harvard's student body, international students who contribute significantly to the University and its mission," Harvard said in its complaint.

The administration's move — part of an ongoing feud with Harvard that includes efforts to rescind millions in federal funding — leaves close to 6,800 international students, or 27.2% of the student body, facing an unclear future.

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"It's the basic uncertainty that people are feeling," explained Kelly, who also serves as pastor of St. Paul Parish, home of the Harvard Catholic Center, which has been Harvard's Catholic chaplaincy since 1893.

Currently, the Harvard Catholic Center serves some 500-600 Sunday Mass attendees — including "students and professors at all levels" — as well as an average of 100 to 150 participants in weekly events, said Kelly.

He said the school's international community was "obviously pleased" with the judge's stay on the visa matter. The priest said it gives them "a little breathing space," but "doesn't take away the concerns."

He noted that the Trump administration's revocation came at a time when many students had already left campus as the semester concluded.

Now, thousands are uncertain if they will be able to return, and those who are still on campus must make life-changing decisions.

"I was talking to one couple who are from Italy and they said, 'If we have to go home, we can,' " said Kelly. "Their families are there and they can easily fit into the university system in Rome."

But "they just had a child," he said. Kelly noted the couple had "uprooted their lives to come to the United States, to come to Harvard," a university that plays "such a significant role in the life of the world."

And the international students, in turn, "are a huge part of our life here," he said. "They bring such vibrant faith from their own cultural backgrounds, and they're just so committed. They really do bring life to things."

In a very real sense, Kelly said, the international students at the Harvard Catholic Center "really do help to put the 'catholic' in Catholic here … [in] the 'universal' sense of the word."

Kelly said that the international students who participate at the center receive "as rich and deep an experience of the Catholic Church as possible," and then share that experience in their countries of origin.

"So many of them are going back to their home countries to be in leadership in law, government, medicine, education, social services, business," he said. "So for them to have this profoundly strong Catholic experience here, and to be able to bring that both into their professional life, but then also into their communities back at home, we really do see that as an important responsibility for us."

The Trump administration revocation "has an impact on what we're able to do for the world, because if international students aren't allowed to come here, then they lose the experience of what they can receive at St. Paul's," Kelly said. "We've had a number of people who have told us that their experience at St. Paul's and the Harvard Catholic Center has completely changed their lives."

Even amid the visa situation, "a number of students are still coming to Mass daily," he said.

Kelly said his pastoral mission at the moment — which he shares with graduate chaplain Fr. George Salzmann, a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, and undergraduate chaplain Fr. Nathaniel Sanders — is simply to be present for the students.

"Being with them, just reminding them that the church is here for them, and we as individual chaplains are here for them," he said. "And whatever [additional outreaches] we can pick up that might be helpful to them, we certainly will do that."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.