News



San Diego Bishop-designate Michael Pham, right, follows Jesuit Fr. Scott Santarosa into the Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse on Friday morning, June 20, in downtown San Diego. (Chris Stone)



by Ken Stone

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Masked agents from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement scattered in the federal courthouse building Friday morning (June 20) when they saw a group of religious leaders, including Bishop-designate Michael Pham of San Diego.

The group, including eight clergy members and a local imam, was there to show support and pray with immigrants and refugees facing deportation hearings on World Refugee Day.

But unlike many other recent hearings, no asylum-seekers were detained outside the courtroom of Judge Catherine Halliday-Roberts.

"Like the story of Moses and Exodus, the Red Sea parted," said Scott Reid of the immigrant-aiding San Diego Organizing Project.

Inside one of eight immigration courtrooms, two cases were heard that morning: a man whose case was continued and a woman whose case had been administratively closed for 20 years and reopened by the government.

Her case also was continued.

Jesuit Fr. Scott Santorosa, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Diego, briefed camera crews and other media members who weren't allowed into the Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse.

"Our presence made a difference," Santorosa said, quoting an immigration lawyer who said their client was given more time to prepare for another hearing.

A local activist said any other day, two to four immigrants would have been detained by ICE agents and taken away in prison vans.

In fact, at least two white vans were parked on an adjacent street with no license plates but padlocks on side doors.



Bishop Michael Pham talks to reporters about his federal court visit to support immigrants at the Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse on World Refugee Day, June 20, 2025, in San Diego. (Chris Stone)

Pham, a Vietnamese refugee as a child, said ICE agents were "standing there covered with masks as we walked toward the courtroom. " He said they eventually "kind of scattered and went away. No wonder people come in fear."

Pham continued the mission of his predecessor, Cardinal Robert McElroy, also an outspoken advocate for immigrants before he left to serve as archbishop of Washington, D.C.

Boot marks were visible on the white walls facing the courtrooms from standing ICE agents who rested their feet during earlier assignments.

Pham said a government lawyer struck up a chat in the restroom.

"He introduced himself to me," Pham told reporters. "He feels conflicted with the situation. He knows his morals and his values."

Santorosa said masked ICE agents were an intimidating presence despite the fact the federal court staff was very accommodating.

Immigrants, he said, "came with great fear and trepidation."

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Fr. Manny Del Rio of St. John of the Cross in nearby Lemon Grove, said: "It was evident that our presence made a difference," pointing out that this was one of the most peaceful times in a long time at the court with no immigrants being detained.

Besides clergy members and reporters, at least a dozen activists (including one not attached to a group but calling herself a "rogue Catholic"), assembled outside the federal building and handed out pamphlets in English and Spanish titled: "KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: ICE ARRESTS AT IMMIGRATION COURTHOUSES."

Under "WHAT TO DO IF ARRESTED," was the advice: "If you fear returning to your home country — say it clearly and out loud to the ICE officers [and] request a credible fear interview."

Another sheet gave information about the group Detention Resistance with hotline numbers to call, an email address and social media pages.



San Diego Bishop-designate Michael Pham celebrates Mass at St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown San Diego before heading to the federal building. (Chris Stone)

Pham — who celebrated Mass at St. Joseph Cathedral before hopping on a bus to the federal building — suggested that priests would return for similar "walks in solidarity" at immigration court.

Or, Pham said, a ministry could be started in the diocese to replicate Friday's event, saying that Santarosa would be the one to spearhead such a ministry.

"All things are possible with God," Santarosa told the National Catholic Reporter.

He said he was told that ICE agents had intended to detain some immigrants Friday and their lawyers expressed gratitude to the assembled clergy.

Pham, in a black suit, entered the courthouse at 8:45 a.m., taking his shoes off by habit (unnecessarily, it turned out) before going through the metal detector. Just before 10 a.m., he let others pack an elevator before he entered one himself.

In the front lobby, he formed a semicircle with other clergy and activist observers.

"This is one of the important issues today," Pham told the gathering as cameras awaited outside. He said he prayed for "wisdom and insight to help our poor brothers ... through the crises in their lives."

A formal prayer was led by Auxiliary Bishop Ramón Bejarano, born in Texas but who spent his early life in Aldama, Chihuahua, when his family moved back to Mexico soon after his birth.

"Bless these refugees and asylum-seekers," Bejarano said, "and all those who seek opportunity."

Since the end of May, one activist with Detention Resistance said he has been a witness to detainee arrests at the San Diego courthouse.

"Anyone who's arrived in the last two years, who does not have a child that is their dependent or doesn't have a serious medical condition" can be detained, said the man, who declined to be named. "Sometimes we've seen them see someone's file. 'Oh look, they have a cancer diagnosis,' and they let them go. But there are many people in Otay Mesa [detention facility] right now who have cancer and aren't being released."