News



The badge of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement official is seen in this undated illustration photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)



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Federal agents have detained migrants on Catholic Church property at two parishes in Southern California's San Bernardino Diocese as the Trump administration tosses aside decades-old norms that fear of arrest or harassment should not deter people from practicing their religion.

"It should be no surprise that this is creating a tremendous amount of fear, confusion and anxiety for many. It is not of the Gospel of Jesus Christ — which guides us in all that we do," San Bernardino Bishop Alberto Rojas said in a letter to the diocese's faithful on Monday, June 23.

The details are sketchy but San Bernardino Catholic Diocese spokesman John Andrews said the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detentions occurred on Friday, June 20.

At St. Adelaide Parish in Highland, agents chased several men into the church parking lot, where they were detained. Separately, a longtime parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes in Montclair was picked up on church property, Andrews said. Andrews said he did not have more details and he did not provide the names or family contacts for those detained.

"Authorities are now seizing brothers and sisters indiscriminately," Rojas said in his letter, "without respect for their right to due process and their dignity as children of God."



Bishop Alberto Rojas of San Bernardino, Calif., in a 2017 file photo (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

This month, ICE and Customs and Border Protection have launched a series of raids in the Los Angeles area, far from the border, causing panic and protests in Hispanic communities.

Widespread raids in the Los Angeles area and nationwide have depressed attendance at Catholic and other churches, as Hispanics even of U.S. citizenship and other forms of legal status stay home for fear of being picked up or harassed, church leaders said.

Rojas said that while he respects law enforcement pursuing violent criminals, these detentions are random and unprovoked.

"We are now seeing agents detain people as they leave their homes, in their places of work and other randomly chosen public settings," including on church property, Rojas said.

"These are young people who are working and not criminals," Andrews said. "We are trying to monitor the situation closely and provide support for the parishes affected."

The diocese serves 1 million Catholics and covers almost 30,000 square miles in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, which are inland and east of Los Angeles.

Tony Tian-Ren Lin, senior adviser for education and public humanities at the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural and Educational Center in New York, said detentions on church property are "direct interference from the government on our freedom to practice our religion."

"Our churches have always been open to everyone, and we welcome everyone," said Lin, who is also an ordained Presbyterian minister.



An undated photograph shows St. Adelaide Catholic Church in Highland, Calif. Diocesan officials say a group of men were detained in the church's parking lot after being chased there by federal immigration agents on June 20. (San Bernardino Diocese)

Lin noted that the principle of sanctuary for people on church property has been a "theological statement for Christians."

That has been turned on its head, he said.

"So now any Christian, who is seeking to be faithful in their church or in their organization, is now restricted in America to practice this part of their faith, which is the welcoming of the needy," Lin said.

Jennifer Koh, associate professor at Pepperdine Caruso School of Law, called the revocation of the earlier policy protecting religious properties and other sensitive sites from enforcement "a real change" that she's never seen before.

"Law enforcement strategies have inflicted a great deal of fear and anxiety on all communities, including the Catholic community, and have really been designed to create fear and inflict cruelty and cause a deep sense of anxiety," she said.

The occasionally aggressive tactics and the decision to enter areas that had been protected from federal enforcement action under earlier administrations have sparked widespread scrutiny and protests.

The surprise raids have popped up throughout Latino neighborhoods and places of employment including restaurants, shops, and informal day labor sites outside home improvement stores.

The enforcement actions have sparked protests especially in the Los Angeles area, where nearly half of the residents are Hispanic. The Trump administration has deployed National Guard troops and U.S. Marines to the protest sites despite the objections of Democratic California Gov. Gavin Newsom.



An undated photo shows Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Montclair, Calif., where a longtime parishioner was picked up on church property by federal immigration agents June 20. (San Bernardino Diocese)

Several recent high-profile cases have provoked outrage, including the detention of a landscaper without legal status who has three sons who have served in the Marines, two of whom are still on active duty.

The videotaped beating of Narciso Barranco by masked U.S. Border Patrol officers in Santa Ana, California while he was held down on the ground during his arrest Saturday, June 21, spread widely on social media.

Last month in Louisiana, ICE officials detained a Marine Corps veteran's wife who was still breastfeeding their baby girl. The mother now faces deportation. The couple also have a 2-year-old boy.

Trinity Missionary Fr. Francisco Gómez Aguilar, the pastor at Our Lady of Soledad Parish in Coachella, in Riverside County, California, recalled when a parishioner came up to him in the church, saying that she does not feel "safe" to go home. Her fear resonated with the palpable sense of dread and betrayal in the community.

"Everybody's feeling very much afraid. Everybody's feeling very injured. Everybody feels betrayed ... a tremendous sadness and quite a bit of impotence," he said.

The town of Coachella, which has a population of about 43,000 people, saw hundreds of ICE agents enter last week, Gómez said.

"Five hundred agents coming into town with no advance warning just created a panic," the pastor said.

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However, the churches have been preparing and praying about this, he said, as they started assembling since President Donald Trump's January 2025 inauguration to hold meetings and vigils to inform people about what they can do to stay safe in the community.

"The kids are extremely frightened," the priest said. "I've had older people coming to talk to me and tears rolling down because they have a sense that it's persecution time. But we are resilient and we will persevere."

As of Monday, June 23, Our Lady of Soledad Parish has begun making home deliveries to help people eat, carrying the food that is usually distributed by Catholic Charities. Due to fear, many have not left their homes.

"A lot of grocery stores are empty. Businesses are empty, parking lots are empty," Gómez explained.

While enforcement actions took place under Trump's first administration, it was "never this aggressive," Gómez said.

"These are human beings and they are being treated worse than animals," he said.

Gómez's bishop, Rojas, pledged support to congregants in his diocese in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

"I say once again to our immigrant communities who are bearing the trauma and injustice of these tactics that your Church walks with you and supports you," Rojas wrote. "We join you in carrying this very difficult cross."