News



Parishioners and members of other area parishes participate in a "Keep Our Priests" rosary rally at St. Mary Church in East Islip, New York, April 29, 2024. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Some immigrant religious workers are facing legal limbo, and Catholic advocates are pushing the Trump administration to address the backlog in their visa category.

Many immigrant religious workers — such as Catholic priests and nuns — legally enter the country on R-1 non-immigrant religious worker visas. These are initially granted for a 30-month period, with one possible renewal allowing for a total of 5 years, so they can be in the U.S. to carry out ministry work. While within that window, they can apply for employment-based EB-4 status so they can legally remain in the U.S. without interruption.

"One of the challenges is that because the number of green cards that are issued every year is not representative of the number of people that are eligible, you've got huge backlogs," Erin Corcoran, an associate teaching professor and executive director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, told OSV News.

"And this affects these religious workers," she said.

That backlog could have a grave impact on the church in the U.S. The National Study of Catholic Priests — released in 2022 by the Catholic University of America's Catholic Project — indicated 24% of priests serving in the U.S. are foreign-born, with many of them also subject to visa renewals.

In April, bipartisan legislation, titled the Religious Workforce Protection Act, was introduced in the Senate by Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Jim Risch, R-Idaho, and in the House by Reps. Mike Carey, R-Ohio, and Richard Neal, D-Mass. In statements at the time, Kaine and Collins both cited priest shortages in their states. All five of those members are Catholic.

If signed into law, the bill would permit religious workers already in the U.S. on temporary R-1 status with pending EB-4 applications to stay in the U.S. while waiting for permanent residency, Collins' office said at the time.



Frs. Charles Gnanapragasam, right, and Thomas Pers participate in a "Keep Our Priests" rosary rally at St. Mary Church in East Islip, New York,, April 29, 2024. More than 300 people gathered to pray for changes in U.S. immigration procedures to prioritize visa and green card applications for foreign-born religious workers, many of whom are being forced to leave the country because of federal delays in processing immigration paperwork. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Catholic organizations, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, also known as CLINIC, have backed the legislation.

A spokesperson for the bishops' conference told OSV News on Aug. 6, "We're continuing our education efforts about the pressing need for the RWPA, and together with our interfaith partners, we're encouraging grassroots supporters to raise this issue with their members of Congress while they are back in their states/districts during the August recess."

"We remain hopeful that Congress will have an opportunity to move the bill forward before the end of the year," the spokesperson said.

Corcoran said the legislation would allow, for example, a Catholic priest with temporary R-1 status, to move from one parish to another in accordance with diocesan needs without jeopardizing that status.

"For many religious workers, as part of your job or part of your vocation, you're going to be moving parishes right?" she said. "And under the current framework, you can't do that without jeopardizing your status."

The bill, however, would not increase the limit on how many visas are granted.

"It's a very modest fix," she said. "One of the things we've seen historically is that there are a lot of small, little fixes that could happen through legislation for these exact kinds of immigration dilemmas. But historically, Congress has always wanted to pass everything at once, so this provision has been put in comprehensive immigration reform bills in the past, but the problem is that there are other provisions in [broader immigration packages] that there can't be consensus on."

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Despite bipartisan support, it was not immediately clear what the prospects might be for the bill once lawmakers return from their August recess, or whether President Donald Trump would be willing to sign it.

The White House did not return a request for comment from OSV News by publication time on whether the Trump administration would support the bill.

But several proponents of the legislation who spoke with OSV News pointed to the bipartisan nature of the bill as cause for optimism.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, a group that works to apply the perspective of Catholic social teaching in policy and practice to the U.S.-Mexico border region, told OSV News, "Congress and the Trump administration have a good opportunity to make an urgent targeted fix to ensure clergy and religious from abroad serving our communities throughout the country don't become casualties of an increasingly broken immigration system."

"Here the Biden administration really fumbled the ball. If we can get this done, the broader lesson can be that it really is possible to come together and find common ground to build an immigration system that is workable, efficient and meets our national needs," Corbett said.

Corcoran said, "We've seen so little bipartisan solutions to problems, and to me, this is the kind of thing that this administration should be embracing, because it can show that they can be compassionate, that there are bipartisan solutions that are available for certain sub-populations within the immigration backlog, and that we all benefit, right, from these people being in our parishes."

Advocacy for the bill comes as the Trump administration seeks to implement hardline immigration policies, including its pursuit of what it has called "the largest deportation in U.S. history."

However, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in an interview that aired Aug. 7 with Raymond Arroyo on EWTN's "The World Over," that the administration is trying to "create its own standalone process" for religious workers, instead of having them conflated with other immigration categories.

"And I've been in touch, for example, with a number of our cardinals here in the United States and bishops about that as well," Rubio said. "And it's not only the Catholic Church. I mean, our other places are being impacted by it but we're trying to streamline that process."

"We clearly view that entry point as very different than some of these others," Rubio said, adding, "We don't want to read headlines that some Catholic Church had to close because it couldn't get their priests here ... some order closed because some nun couldn't get here. So we're not interested in that. That's really not the aim here. It's more caught up in the structure of it. We'll have a plan to fix it. We're working on it. We know it's an issue, and we're committed to fixing it."

Congress is scheduled to return from its August recess in early September.

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