News

Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala of the Archdiocese of Washington Sr. Norma Pimentel,

Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala of the Archdiocese of Washington and Sr. Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, speak at a Georgetown University event on Sept. 11, 2025. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)



by Patricia Zapor

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The dreams of immigrants are "just collapsing," Bishop Evelio Menjivar said before joining a panel of Catholic activists critical of the Trump administration’s immigration policy.

Menjivar, a Washington auxiliary bishop who himself is an immigrant, said immigrants' imploding dreams are because of instability caused by President Donald Trump's pervasive threat of deportation.

The government's immigration policy is among the biggest pastoral challenges in trying to attend to the needs of Catholics, the bishop said.

Speaking to journalists at Georgetown University on Sept. 11, Menjivar said most immigrants to the United States left their home countries because of political or economic instability — just as he did. Menjivar came to the United States as a young adult to escape civil war in El Salvador.

Miami, Florida, Archbishop Thomas Wenski, right, speaks alongside Sr. Norma Pimentel of Cat

Miami, Florida, Archbishop Thomas Wenski, right, speaks alongside Sr. Norma Pimentel of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley and Washington Archdiocese Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala at Georgetown University on Sept. 11, 2025. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

Menjivar was one of the immigration specialists and Catholic leaders participating in a panel held by Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. The legal and Catholic social teaching specialists noted that Trump's aggressive pursuit of immigrants near churches and schools was frightening migrants away from religious services — a form of breach of religious liberty that the administration purports to champion.

The Washington bishop said he sees fear in the eyes of fellow immigrants and that it plays out in ways such as children not being sent to school, or not allowed to participate in after-school activities. They are opting out of school and activities because their parents "don't want to risk" their possible exposure to immigration enforcement, Menjivar said.

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Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski has spent time ministering at Alligator Alcatraz, the hastily assembled detention center in Florida that housed immigrants in conditions decried as unsafe and unsanitary as well as for environmental concerns.

In August, a federal District Court judge ordered the administration to wind down operations there by the end of October. On Sept. 4, a three-judge panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals put that ruling on hold, pending the administration's appeal.

Wenski said the Trump administration's approach is "to paint all immigrants as lawbreakers. But the reality is the law is breaking them. The law is inadequate to meet the needs of the nation. The law is antiquated, the law is ineffective and because of the ineffectiveness we have people living in this country for 20 years, 30 years, many with a legal work permit."



Bishop Mark Seitz of the Diocese of El Paso, Texas, is chairman of the U.S. bishops' conference Committee on Migration. (NCR photo/Patricia Zapor)

Many have started businesses and become established. Now they are being told to go "home," Wenski said.

Wenski and Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, who chairs the Committee on Migration of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, also spoke to reporters about the challenge of trying to explain Catholic teaching about immigration and human rights in ways that are heard by the people in the pews.

Nichole Flores, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, said it is "important to know the prevalence of misinformation about Catholic teachings. There is really straightforward Catholic teaching on this matter and it is misconstrued, bent and folded in lots of ways that are convenient for various political interests."

Seitz said one way to persuade the Trump administration on inconsistencies on immigration might be through the topic of religious liberty.

"It is interesting, since the administration has put a large amount of emphasis on all kinds of rights including religious liberty, that we find ourselves in this conflict," the El Paso bishop said. "We're happy for the opportunity to dialogue on these issues

and to point out where we see inconsistencies that are damaging."

Ashley Feasley (SFS’02) is the Legal Expert in Residence at the Immigration Law and Policy In

Speaking to the media are El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, left, Ashley Feasley, center, of the Catholic University of America’s law school, Nichole Flores of the University of Virginia, and Fr. Guillermo Treviño Jr., chaplain of Escucha Mi Voz, a community organizing group in Iowa. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

Ashley Feasley, who is in residence at the Immigration Law and Policy Initiative at the Columbus School of Law at the Catholic University of America, pointed to what has been known as the "sensitive locations" policy started during the Obama administration and kept during the first Trump administration.

"It allows for, absent exigent circumstances, you cannot do immigration enforcement at schools, hospitals, places of religious worship," she said. "Within the first few days of the [second] Trump administration they rescinded the policy and put forth a policy that is much less clear."

Feasley said many bishops have spoken nationally about their concern about the ability for immigrants and refugees to receive the sacraments, to come to church.

Feasley noted that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection officers have pursued migrants into church grounds. Bishops have reported that immigrants are afraid to go to church.

"This is an area where, if the Trump administration is talking about religious liberty, that would go a long way to talk to the bishops about what is this policy, what can be done, particularly as it relates to houses of worship and people's ability to go about their daily lives and attend to the sacraments,” Feasley said.

"Particularly in this time," she said, "our ability to be with our church and our faith is just so crucial. I think there are decision-makers who would understand this."