News



Bishop Joseph Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima, Wash., is seen in a 2020 file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Washington, is calling on federal authorities to release a local man who was taken into custody by immigration officers in mid-September.

According to local news reports and statements from diocesan officials, José López, an undocumented migrant from Mexico, was apprehended Sept. 11 by federal agents who stopped his vehicle in Yakima.

The agents said López matched the description of the previous owner of the vehicle he was driving. Though he was not the man the agents were looking for, López was still arrested — allegedly for not obeying the agents' orders — and is now being held in a federal detention facility in Tacoma, Washington.

"There was a kind of racial profiling here," Tyson told National Catholic Reporter in a recent phone interview where he said that the federal government should release López in the interest of justice.

"Mr. López runs a construction business. He has been operating legally in the state with no [criminal] record. He goes about his daily work and pays his taxes," Tyson said.

In a video shared widely on social media, López is seen kneeling on the ground in a parking lot with his hands cuffed. The person recording the video asks him his name, to which López responds in Spanish: "I didn't do anything. ... They just came, stopped me, didn't ask me anything."

López's son told the Yakima Herald-Republic that the agents broke two of the vehicle's windows and removed his father, who experienced an eye injury, from the vehicle.

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Tyson called for López to be released while preaching at Mass on Sept. 14, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, at St. Paul Cathedral in Yakima. In his homily, Tyson said López had worked in the United States for more than 20 years.

"If it is true that José López was wrongly identified, then morally speaking he should be released from detention," Tyson said. "José López should be released immediately. He should be released now."

However, a prepared statement emailed to NCR, attributed to Tricia McLaughlin, the assistant secretary for public affairs for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, suggests that federal officials are not open to releasing López.

"Under President Trump and [Homeland] Secretary [Kristi] Noem, if you break the law — including serial drunk drivers — you will face the consequences. Criminal illegal aliens are not welcome in the U.S. We are putting the safety of the American people first," McLaughlin said.

The Yakima Immigrant Response Network reported that López's arrest was one of at least six in the Yakima area that immigration agents conducted Sept. 11-12. The arrests occurred amid the Trump administration's ongoing efforts to ramp up immigration enforcement operations.

"There's an enormous amount of fear among our immigrant communities," said Tyson, who told NCR that local Spanish-speaking Catholics have been focused on the immigration enforcement issue.

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In contrast, Tyson said English-speaking Catholics have been more consumed with the news of the Sept. 10 assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk.

A recent report commissioned by a group of Christian organizations, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, found that 10 million Christians in the United States are at risk of being deported under the Trump administration's plan to carry out the largest mass deportation in U.S. history.

Released in April, the report estimated that about one out of five Catholics are either vulnerable to deportation themselves or could see a family member deported. In the Yakima Diocese, Tyson said one in two Catholics are at risk of deportation.

"In about half of our parishioners' families, someone is at risk," Tyson told NCR. "I have one priest whose parents are in the process of self-deporting."

Fr. Jesús Mariscal, a priest of the Yakima Diocese who serves as parochial vicar at St. Paul Cathedral, told NCR that he knows many local migrants who have put their lives on hold amid all the uncertainty.



Fr. Jesús Mariscal (OSV News/Catholic Extension)

"People are asking their relatives who are documented to go grocery shopping. For those who don't have anybody to do that for them, they either go to the grocery store really late or really early," said Mariscal. He added that for many, their social lives do not extend far beyond Mass attendance.

"People have fear," he said. "At some of the day cares here, they tell me a lot of their clients bring their children in for the day and they give them power of attorney just in case they don't come back from work. That's really sad."

In a recent weekly mailing to priests in the diocese, Tyson highlighted the immigrant backgrounds of several local priests and seminarians, a few of whom at local immigration forums have shared the harrowing stories of their families using coyotes to cross the border into the United States.

"Because the stories came from priests, their migration stories and their connecting their vocation to priesthood back to their biblical-style migration, even the ambivalent parishioners were receptive," Tyson said.

The bishop also noted that the Yakima Diocese maintains an online immigration resource page with links in English and Spanish for people to know their rights if confronted by federal immigration officers. The page also recommends that families have an emergency preparedness plan in the event that a relative is taken into custody.

Tyson also advised that nobody should ever attend a meeting with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement alone, adding that they should preferably bring an attorney. He has also asked local clergy as well as laypeople to offer to accompany people to their ICE appointments.

"It's a really challenging time," Tyson said.