Opinion
Editorial



Cardinal Robert McElroy celebrates Mass Sept. 28, 2025, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington during a Mass for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which the church observes Oct. 4-5 this year. In his homily, McElroy, archbishop of Washington, singled out what he called the government's assaults against migrants and thanked church members and others who have come to their aid. (GSR/Rhina Guidos)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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In a powerfully compelling message issued from the heart of the Christian Gospel and foundational Catholic social teaching, Washington's Cardinal Robert McElroy provided the guidance U.S. Catholics have been searching for as they witness what he termed a government assault on the immigrant community.

It was delivered at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in the nation's capital during a Mass celebrating the 111th World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

The observance normally passes without much fanfare. But this year is different, said McElroy. "For this year we are confronting — both as a nation and as a church — an unprecedented assault upon millions of immigrant men and women and families in our midst."



An estimated 1,000 Catholics and others supporting migrants gather outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington after a procession to observe the World Day of Migrants and Refugees Sept. 28, 2025. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

He noted that Catholic social teaching permits nations to secure borders and protect their citizens by deporting violent criminals. But he is also clear that what we are seeing is something far more sinister and violative of that same teaching. Governments have no warrant to use indiscriminate force and violence with little justification against vulnerable populations.

"We are witnessing a comprehensive governmental assault designed to produce fear and terror among millions of men and women who have through their presence in our nation been nurturing precisely the religious, cultural, communitarian and familial bonds that are most frayed and most valuable at this moment in our country's history," he said.

"The assault seeks to make life unbearable for undocumented immigrants. It is willing to tear families apart, separating grieving mothers from their children, and fathers from the sons and daughters who are the center of their lives. It embraces as collateral damage the horrific emotional suffering that is being thrust on children who were born here, but now face the terrible choice of losing their parents or leaving the only country that they have ever known."

The case McElroy made from scripture and church teaching is, for Catholics, unassailable.

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While the government claims its core mission is to rid the country of violent criminals, "the reality we are facing in the Archdiocese of Washington and across our country is far different. For our government is engaged in — by its own admission and by the tumultuous enforcement actions it has launched — a comprehensive campaign to uproot millions of families and hardworking men and women who have come to our country seeking a better life that includes contributing to building up the best elements of our culture and society."

It is a campaign, he said, that, at its core, "relies on fear and terror."

The cardinal referenced the parable of the good Samaritan, which he described as "the greatest parable Jesus gave to the formation of our moral lives and our understanding of bonds of community and sacrifice and embrace in this world."

As understood in the current circumstances, the parable makes unprecedented demands on Catholic Christians.

"The most striking element of the parable," said McElroy, "is not that the Samaritan took notice of the man who had been robbed, or that he was willing to sacrifice on his behalf, or that he placed his own life at risk by stopping in a very dangerous location to see if help was needed. No, the most striking element of the Parable is

that the Samaritan was willing to reject the norms of society which said that because of his birth and status he had no obligation to the victim, who was a Jew. The piercing insight and glory of the Samaritan was that he rejected the narrowness and myopia of the law to understand that the victim he was passing by was truly his neighbor and that both God and the moral law obliged him to treat him as neighbor."



The parable of the good Samaritan is depicted in a stained-glass window at Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip, N.Y., on World Day of the Sick, Feb. 11, 2021. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The good Samaritan parable is one of the widest known in the Christian scriptures. It is basic to introductory courses on the faith as well as advanced study of the texts. But more often than not, the tale is related to much easier applications — those who are different from us, those with whom we might disagree, those of other faiths or cultures. Rarely does it apply to those who, should we treat them as neighbors, would place us in opposition to both social norms and civil laws.

McElroy's message arrives with a desperately needed clarity amid the unfortunate clutter of voices on the issue, even within the church.

> There's just no getting around it. They are our neighbors. We are their neighbors. We cannot ignore our neighbors being hauled off by masked, unidentified agents, without warrant, due process or knowing where they are being sent or for how long.
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At a recent program held by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Teaching and Public Policy, three bishops and an archbishop were among eight panelists who spoke compellingly and compassionately about the fear and uncertainty immigrants and refugees faced because of the government's indiscriminate deportation campaign.

When it came time for audience questions, the bishops were told that a lot of Catholics and those of other faiths were wondering: "Where is the bishops' conference?" The questioner wanted to know, beyond the individual bishops who had made strong stands on the issue and the statements available from Pope Francis and now Pope Leo, whether any of the bishops on the panel foresee "a more visible, prophetic role by the bishops' conference, as a conference."

The answers were awkward and embarrassing, ranging from a reference to a website that was part of a conference subcommittee to a self-conscious chuckle and claim that the media doesn't listen to bishops any more. One recommendation was to consult a pastoral letter, "Strangers No Longer," jointly issued more than 20 years ago by the bishops of the United States and Mexico.

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)

It is evident that the conference remains deeply divided, leaving lots of room for prelates such as Bishop Robert Barron of Winona, Minnesota, and New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan to win the attention economy's momentary stare.

But the long-haul truth, the one that will ultimately distinguish the Catholic community as deeply attuned to the heart of the gospel, is no cheap publicity stunt or sound bite. It exists far from the realms of Facebook and TikTok. It takes us, instead, face-to-face with our desperate neighbors.

The clarion call was issued in the cathedral in the nation's capital. It should spread to dioceses and parishes throughout the country. It needs to be the basis for the answer to the "What's next?" question. Catholics at the parish and diocesan level have to organize in far greater numbers and make their voices heard in legislative halls, town meetings and at the polls.

There's just no getting around it. They are our neighbors. We are their neighbors. We cannot ignore our neighbors being hauled off by masked, unidentified agents, without warrant, due process or knowing where they are being sent or for how long.

Our hope is that a conference that can find inordinate sums to back single-issue initiatives and Eucharistic extravaganzas can spare some of that political muscle and money for this urgent life cause. At the least, we hope they can achieve an unambiguous unified voice challenging the governmental cruelty at work.

The cardinal sees no room for indifference and every reason for boldness. "Courage and sacrifice must be the hallmark of our actions at this moment of historic and deliberate suffering being visited upon people living truly good lives that are a credit to our nation."

Catholics in the United States face an unusually searing call to holiness and solidarity. Our neighbors' very lives depend on our response.

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