News



The badge and gun of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent is seen during an operation with migrants being transferred to a plane to be expelled under U.S. Title 42 from the United States to their home country by ICE and Border Patrol agents, at the airport in El Paso, Texas, May 10, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

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Immigrant priests, seminarians and religious in the U.S. are among those impacted by immigration enforcement policy, advocates and analysts told OSV News.

Bishop Joseph Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima in central Washington wrote in a recent newsletter that several seminarians in the diocese were among them, including one who was born in the U.S. but left to be with his parents, who had self-deported to Mexico.

In an interview with OSV News, Tyson said many of the priests and seminarians in his diocese come from immigrant backgrounds.

"I know how hard it is to keep my priests and my seminarians in status," he said. "I can only imagine what it's like for parishioners who don't have a fleet of lawyers."

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Tyson cited a joint report released earlier this year by the National Association of Evangelicals, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and World Relief, which found many of those vulnerable to deportation themselves — or those who have a family member vulnerable to deportation — are Christians.

More than 10 million Christians living in the U.S. would be vulnerable to deportation under Trump administration policies implemented in 2025, the report said. Christians account for approximately 80% of all those at risk of deportation, it added, and the Christians most at risk of deportation were Catholics, 61% of the total. The report found one in six Catholics (18%) are either vulnerable to deportation or live with someone who is.

In the Diocese of Yakima, the bishop said, that number is probably higher.

J. Kevin Appleby, senior fellow for policy at the Center for Migration Studies in New York and former director of migration policy for the U.S. bishops' conference, told OSV News, "I think priests and religious from other nations are in a challenging situation, caught between looking after their flock here and perhaps also being a target of enforcement, even if they have legal status."

"They can play an important role, however, in ministering to immigrants and their families, as they have a shared experience with them and understand the fear they are feeling," Appleby said. "When push comes to shove — and loyal to their ministry — they will stand with their immigrant brothers and sisters and be a great asset to the church in the U.S. at this troubling time."

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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, but the study didn't record visa or green card status.

Of these priests, 15% were ordained outside the U.S., while others are foreign-born priests who came to the U.S. as seminarians, were ordained in the U.S. and are also subject to visa renewals, it said.

The consequence of immigration enforcement to the maximum degree, Tyson said, would mean "we have parishes without priests immediately."

The U.S. bishops have offered their support to bipartisan congressional legislation that would ease some immigration restrictions on religious workers from other countries. The legislation, titled the Religious Workforce Protection Act, 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.

An April letter from the U.S. bishops' conference to lawmakers about the Religious Workforce Protection Act said, "Simply put, an increasing number of American families will be unable to practice the basic tenets of their faith if this situation is not addressed soon. Likewise, hospitals will go without chaplains, schools will go without teachers, and seminaries will go without instructors."

Catholic groups are among those urging the Trump administration to address the backlog in the R-1 visa category.

Read this next: US immigration policy changes make religious worker visas difficult to get

Tyson said that legislation would help ease some of the challenges presented by ensuring his priests' legal status remains in good order.

"Foreign-born religious workers play a vital role in serving immigrant communities in the U.S., often providing services in the languages people know best and offering a sense of home and support," Miguel Naranjo, director of religious immigration services at the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, commonly known as CLINIC, told OSV News.

"With the end of the protected locations policy, we have seen growing fear in immigrant communities about ICE presence in houses of worship — and even greater risks to the religious workers themselves," Naranjo said. "Many now carry proof of status at all times, aware of the heightened enforcement climate. Immigrants are increasingly afraid to leave home, attend services, or risk being separated from their families. Yet, despite these challenges, foreign-born religious workers remain steadfast. Their courage and commitment to their ministry have only deepened, knowing their role in serving immigrant communities is more critical than ever."



Bishop Joseph Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima, Wash., is pictured concelebrating Mass at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome Feb. 4, 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Asked about Pope Leo XIV's recent comments calling on the U.S. bishops to speak with a unified voice on migration issues, Tyson said, "I think we've got to somehow find a way of reclaiming the pulpit, because I think there's voices outside the bishops' conference that are very loud on this, and we have Catholics in public life that teach things that are incorrect about the human person."

"I think that's kind of where we the bishops really have to figure out how we're going to work with the social media landscape, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram — the plethora of people that launch things and tend to minimize the weight of our teachings in general on Catholic social teaching, very specifically around immigration," he said.

Catholic social teaching on immigration balances three interrelated principles — the right of persons to migrate in order to sustain their lives and those of their families, the right of a country to regulate its borders and control immigration, and a nation's duty to regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

Tyson noted there was controversy surrounding Leo's recent comments in which the pontiff said church teaching on both immigration and abortion were clear.

"In the Diocese of Yakima, I don't have the luxury of choosing between protecting the unborn and protecting the undocumented," he said. "If you want to save the unborn, you have to walk through the doors of the undocumented, because that's where the pregnancies are, that's where the births are, that's where the vast majority of my baptisms are. These are not separate universes. It's one thing."