News



Capuchin Br. Stephen Wright, right, stands with other members of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart as they get ready to distribute groceries to parishioners who are afraid to leave home and go to the grocery store due to immigration raids in Washington, Oct. 11, 2025. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

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The imposing Shrine of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic church a short drive from the White House, was intended to be a sanctuary for worshippers. Now, its mostly immigrant congregation is steeped in fear.

Church leaders say more than 40 members of their parish have been detained, deported or both since federal law enforcement stepped up their deployment in August.

Many parishioners are too scared to leave home to attend Mass, buy food or seek medical care, as the Trump administration's immigration crackdown targets their communities.

Cardinal Robert McElroy, who leads the Archdiocese of Washington, said the government was using fear to rob immigrants "of any sense of real peace or security."

"It really is an instrument of terror," he told The Associated Press.

Trump's federal law enforcement surge technically ended on Sept. 10. But National Guard troops and federal agents remain in the nation's capital. That includes immigration authorities, who continue to prowl near Sacred Heart, which sits in a vibrant Latino community flanked by two neighborhoods — Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant — that have been home to successive waves of immigrants.

The parish was established more than 100 years ago by Irish, Italian and German immigrants. Today, most of its 5,600 members came from El Salvador, but also from Haiti, Brazil and Vietnam.

The immigration raids have upended lives and worship at Sacred Heart. Families grieve for missing loved ones. Attendance at Masses, which are held in several languages, has dropped dramatically, visible in the many empty pews under the domed church's colorful mosaics.

"About half the people are afraid to come," said Fr. Emilio Biosca, the church's pastor.

But the church community rejects being reduced to powerless victims. During the crisis, pastors and church volunteers have attended immigration court hearings, covered rent and legal fees, and donated and delivered food to those fearful of leaving home.

"Our role here at the church has changed, also dramatically," Biosca said. "Because we have so many people who are adversely affected by that situation, we cannot possibly go on with business as usual."

Active church volunteers face deportation

On a recent day, parishioners dedicated a rosary to the detained and deported church members. They pray daily on Zoom because so many are fearful of stepping outside their homes.

Among them was a woman who hasn't returned to the church since last month, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers detained her husband while the couple sold fruits and vegetables from a stand that was their main source of income.

They entered the U.S. illegally nearly two decades ago to escape gang violence in El Salvador. They met at Sacred Heart, where they both have been active volunteers, often leading retreats and programs. For years, her husband helped coordinate popular Holy Week processions.

When her husband was detained, the first person the woman called was her pastor. Since then, the church has helped to pay her rent. She is now preparing to move to Boston with family members as her husband faces deportation from a Louisiana detention center. Barring some unforeseen change that would allow him to stay in the U.S., she plans to move back to El Salvador to be with him.

"It's been a very difficult, bitter month of crying and suffering," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear she could be deported. "Our lives changed from one day to the next. We had so many dreams."

In her apartment, she clutched rosary beads, surrounded by the cardboard boxes she had been packing with their belongings. On her desk near a makeshift altar of the Virgin Mary, she keeps a prayer card of Pope Leo XIV, who has vowed to "stand with" migrants.

When someone on the Zoom worship read a name from a long list of the detained, she flinched and whispered sadly: "That's my husband." Above her hung a framed photo of the couple, smiling joyfully on their wedding day at Sacred Heart.

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The Catholic Church supports migrants

A top archdiocesan leader, Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar, crossed into the U.S. illegally in 1990 after fleeing El Salvador. His journey to the church hierarchy — after working odd jobs and obtaining asylum and then U.S. citizenship — has made him an important symbol for the area's Catholic immigrants.

Of the recent ICE detainments, Menjivar said, "That could have been me, you know."

He recently helped lead a procession in support of migrants and refugees that began at Sacred Heart.

He said the parish feels like home to him. "It holds a very special place not just for me, but for many, many immigrants."

The Catholic Church staunchly defends the rights of migrants, even as it acknowledges the rights of nations to control their borders. U.S. Catholics depend on foreign-born priests to serve parishes. In the Washington Archdiocese, which includes D.C. and parts of Maryland, more than 40% of parishioners are Latino.

Tricia McLaughlin, Department of Homeland Security assistant secretary, said via email that "DHS law enforcement in Washington, D.C. is targeting the worst of the worst violent criminal aliens."

Biosca, Sacred Heart's pastor, had thought the Trump administration's immigration enforcement would target violent criminals. But then, he said, they began to go after his congregation.

"It became very unbearable," he said, adding that the targets seemed like anyone who "just looked Hispanic."

At the Sacred Heart School, principal Elias Blanco said at least two families withdrew their children because they didn't want to risk being detained while dropping them off.

"There's certainly a lot of fear with our parents," he said.

Many of the children at the school are U.S. citizens who have parents in the country illegally. In case they are detained, some parents have signed caregiver affidavits, which designate a legal guardian, in hopes their children stay out of foster care.

"It's like a ripple effect," Blanco said of the immigration detentions. "It might be one person, but that individual is the father of someone, the husband of someone, the brother, and then it impacts the whole family."

Clergy join immigrants at court

Church leaders have accompanied congregants to immigration court, where, in cities nationwide, masked ICE officers have arrested immigrants as they leave hearings.

Fr. Carlos Reyes, a Sacred Heart priest originally from El Salvador, attended a hearing with a 20-year-old congregant who recently arrived in the U.S. illegally from Bolivia.

Thanks to support from Reyes and Sacred Heart, she said her hope and her Catholic faith have deepened.

"It's a refuge for me because it's all I have here, because I don't have anyone," she said, sobbing after a Sunday Mass. She spoke on condition of anonymity because she has another court hearing soon and fears deportation.

Parishioners make deliveries to those in hiding

On a recent Saturday, volunteers gathered in the church basement. They formed a circle to pray before they packed bags of donated food.

Then they made deliveries to immigrant congregants who hadn't left their homes in weeks, not even to buy groceries. Some recipients stepped out to thank the

volunteers, cautiously looking around for ICE personnel.

"These people are losing their dignity," said a congregant who helped deliver the food and is a legal U.S. resident. She spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing her U.S. citizenship process could still be disrupted.

"As people of God, we can't just sit and watch," she said. "We have to do what we can."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.