News



House Speaker Mike Johnson speaks at the Capitol, Oct 29, 2025, in Washington. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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House Speaker Mike Johnson dismissed religious freedom concerns on Wednesday (Oct. 29) about clergy protesting mass deportations being shot with pepper rounds and pepper bullets by Department of Homeland Security agents, saying the agents have conducted themselves in a "measured" manner.

"Religious freedom does not extend and give you the right to get in the face of an ICE officer and assault them, if indeed that was what happened there," said Johnson, a Southern Baptist, in response to a question from Religion News Service. "What I've seen is a measured approach by the people who are trying to enforce our border laws, our immigration laws, and that was desperately needed and desired and demanded by the American people."

In recent incidents at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency detention center in Broadview, Illinois, and at a Coast Guard station in Oakland, California, ICE and Border Patrol personnel have been filmed shooting clergy with pepper balls, pepper rounds or rubber bullets, or faith leaders have reported agents doing so.

In a lawsuit filed in Illinois earlier this month against DHS, a group that includes journalists, clergy and demonstrators argue federal agents have violated the religious freedom of faith-based protesters, among other claims. A federal judge quickly sided with the plaintiffs and issued a temporary restraining order on Oct. 9 limiting the agents' ability to use violence against protesters, including "religious practitioners." The Rev. David Black, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chicago who was filmed being shot in the head with pepper balls, is a plaintiff in the suit.

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The House speaker was asked about one of the incidents in a press conference earlier this month but claimed no knowledge of the incidents when first questioned about them on Wednesday, before outlining his understanding of the religious freedom issues involved. He later added, referring to ICE agents: "Thank the Lord that there are people who are willing to do that difficult job or put on the badge and show that kind of courage. We should be on the side of law enforcement."

The treatment of faith leaders at immigration protests has drawn attention this month after footage of DHS agents shooting Black with a pepper ball was widely shared on social media. Another clip, filmed last week, shows the Rev. Jorge Bautista, a United Church of Christ minister, being shot in the face with a pepper round by an agent in Oakland, California, who stood only a few feet away, leaving the minister's face bloodied and covered in pepper dust.

Three other Christian clergy — two United Methodist pastors and another PCUSA — have told RNS that they, too, have been shot with pepper balls and rubber bullets while demonstrating at the Broadview detention center. Other faith leaders have also said they have encountered tear gas fired by agents to disperse demonstrators at that facility.

More than 250 Chicago-area clergy have signed a statement criticizing ICE's actions in the city and pledging to put their "bodies on the line" to advocate for immigrants, citing their faith. Cardinal Blase Cupich, the Catholic archbishop of Chicago, issued his own statement last week, declaring "the Church stands with migrants."

Mainline Christian and Jewish clergy have been among the most vocal opponents of President Donald Trump's mass deportation effort. At a service at the Washington National Cathedral after Inauguration Day, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, asked Trump in a sermon to "have mercy" on immigrants. Since then, more than 55 religious organizations, including the leadership of several Christian and Jewish denominations, have filed lawsuits against the president's administration, most of them challenging aspects of his immigration policies.

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