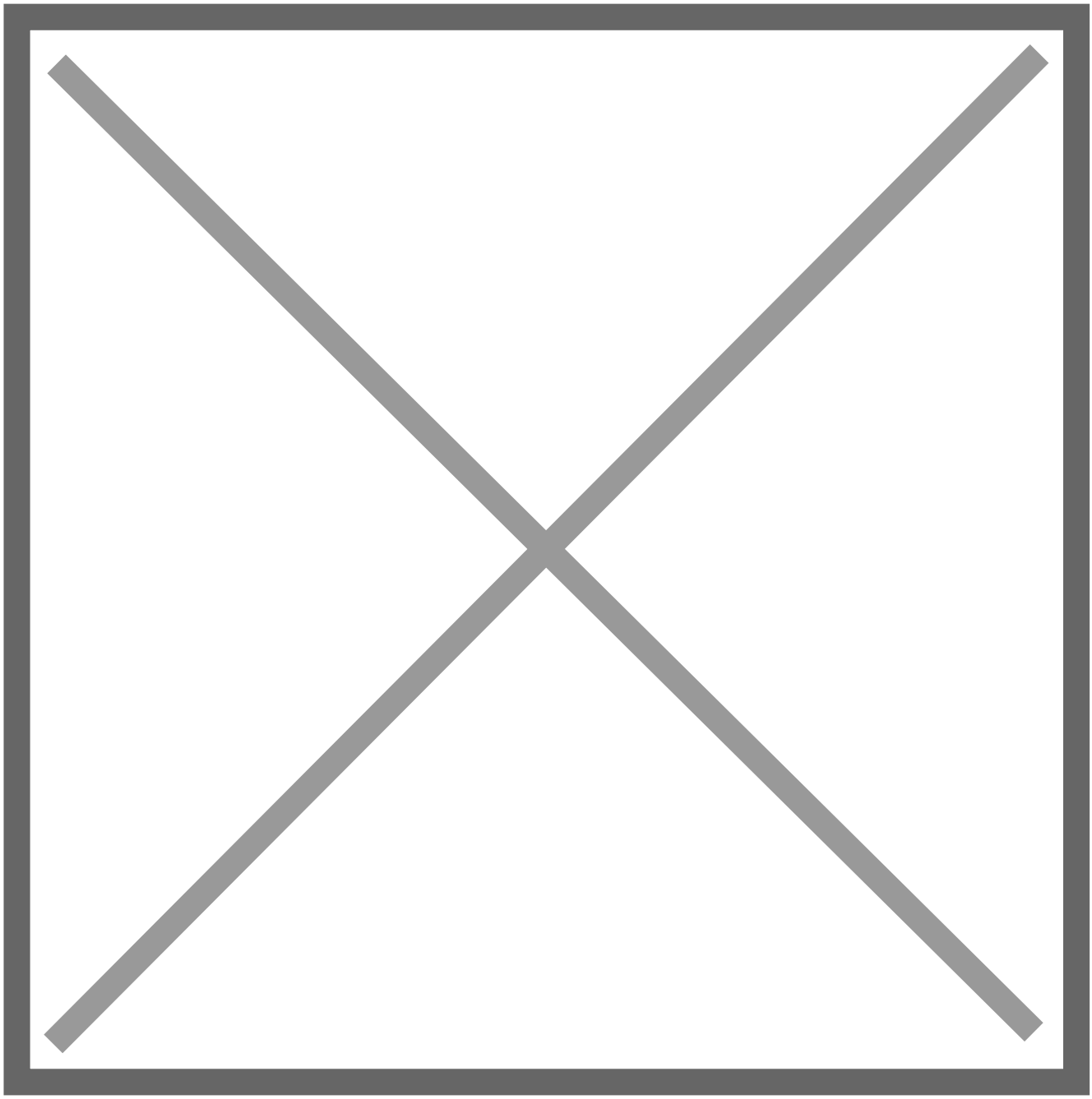
News
Analysis



Franciscan Sr. Therese Ann Quigney distributes Communion during Mass at Chicago Gaelic Park following the 2025 International Famine Commemoration in Oak Forest Nov. 2, 2025. Catholics in Chicago remembered the Irish famine that left more than 1 million people dead and began the mass exodus of Irish refugees and migrants seeking a better life to the United States and other countries 180 years ago. (OSV News/Hailey Hoffman)



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On Nov. 2, the feast of All Souls, Catholics in Chicago joined in commemorating the great Irish famine that left more than 1 million people dead and began the mass exodus of Irish refugees and migrants seeking a better life to the United States and other countries 180 years ago.

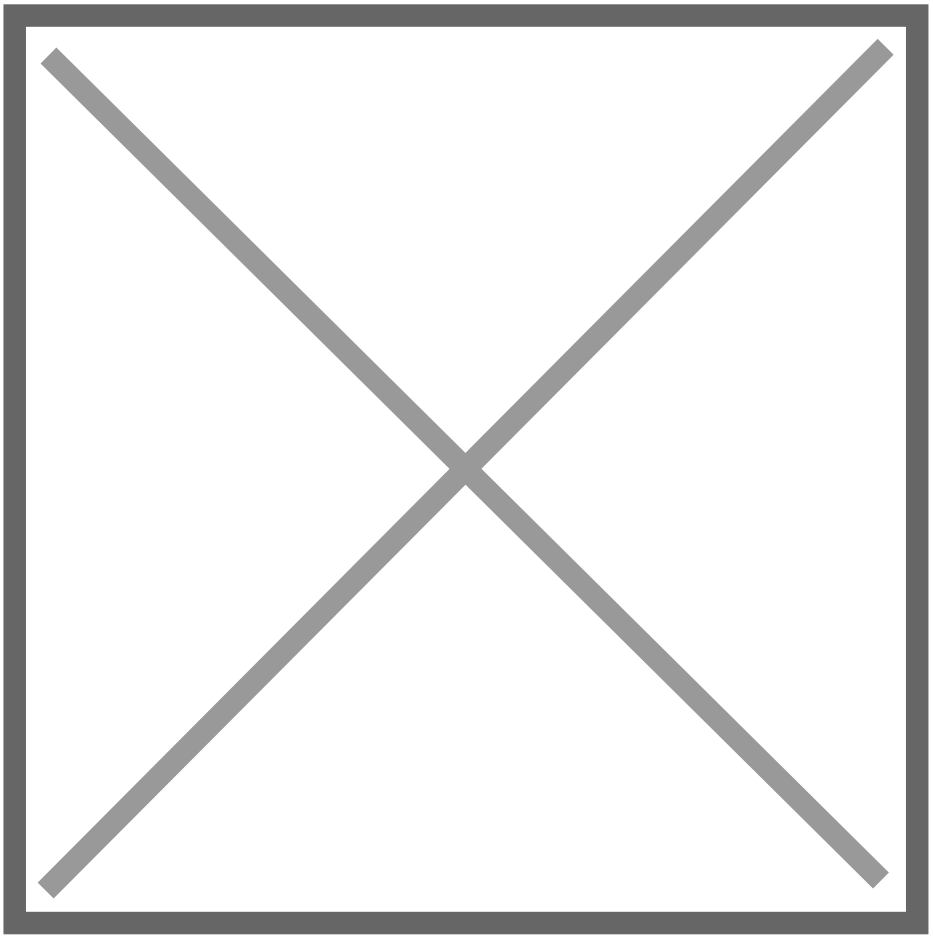
Ireland's National Famine Commemoration Committee chose Chicago as the 2025 host city for its annual international event, during a time that the immigration crackdown in the United States has deeply touched the city.

In a statement that day marking the commemoration of Ireland's great famine, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich prompted the faithful to "join (him) in prayer and remembrance" in commemorating the tragedy.

"As we observe this sad anniversary, let us also remember that what turned an agricultural failure into human tragedy was the reality that their government stood by and watched it happen without meaningful response," he said.

The Great Hunger, or "An Gorta Mór" as it is called in Irish, began in 1845 when Ireland's potato crops — the mainstay of two-thirds of Ireland's population — failed

for several seasons from a decay-causing fungal attack that spread across the country's land. However, the ruling British government insisted that food export quotas from Ireland be maintained while spending little to aid the people, leading to mass death among the Irish by starvation, famine-induced diseases, exhaustion in workhouses and exposure to elements following eviction-induced homelessness.



Ireland's Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport Patrick O'Donovan bows his head after laying a wreath at the Famine Memorial at Chicago Gaelic Park in Oak Forest Nov. 2, 2025. O'Donovan is also the chair of the National Famine Commemoration Committee. (OSV News/Hailey Hoffman)

British landlords also turned out tens of thousands of Irish tenant families who could no longer pay rent — 50,000 families alone by 1846 — tearing down their homes and confiscating their properties, with many landlords seeing the crisis as an opportunity to build larger and more profitable estates. The crisis worsened after the British government saddled Ireland's landlords and tenants with financing their own famine relief under the 1847 Poor Law tax amendment. Many tenant families

were therefore coerced into surrendering their plots of land to receive aid and had to join overcrowded workhouses where mortality rates soared.

Historians estimate that between 1-1.5 million people in Ireland died by the time the famine ended in 1852.

"It is difficult, even from the distance of many generations, to contemplate the enormity of the disaster that left more than a million dead and forced many more into a shadow existence of workhouses and privation," Cupich said. "Neither did the million who boarded ships to anywhere hope might lie find a warm welcome in their new countries. Shunned because of their faith and their poverty, many were told they 'need not apply' for work. Still, the gifts they brought and their perseverance have enriched every place they found refuge, however grudging."

On the sunny grounds of Chicago Gaelic Park, an Irish cultural center in the Village of Midlothian on the southwest border of the city, Ireland's minister of culture, communications and sports, who also chairs the commemoration committee, laid a wreath at a famine memorial sculpture at the Nov. 2 ceremony.

Culture Minister Patrick O'Donovan stood by the bronze sculpture of a weary looking, bone-thin family made decades ago by Fr. Anthony Brankin, a retired Chicago priest of Italian and Irish descent, who celebrated All Souls' Day Mass at the park's banquet hall.

Before laying the wreath, O'Donovan conveyed to the few hundred people gathered the enormity of the disaster that reduced Ireland's pre-famine population of 8 million by more than 3 million people within a decade. The island's population today — 7.1 million between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland — is still lower than its pre-famine peak.

O'Donavan described the plight of the more than 1 million Irish who died of starvation and its related illnesses. He also described how almost 2 million Irish permanently exited their homeland to flee the Great Hunger: "Coffin ships," barely seaworthy vessels, carried most of the Irish refugees and migrants across the Atlantic to the United States during this time, while others headed to Australia and other countries.

"If you were lucky to make it to the United States, you were lucky," said O'Donovan in an impassioned speech highlighting the stripping away of his people's native

tongue, culture and Catholic faith (among other faiths) under British rule. "Otherwise you were dumped at sea as another unrecorded victim of bad management and bad politics. Because for me, while the potato blight was caused by nature, the Irish famine was caused by politicians and particularly those in Westminster, who showed absolutely no regard for and no compassion, no empathy, no sympathy, for the Irish."

> "This country of immigrants can choose to ignore its past mistakes — all vigorously justified at the time — and add another to our national sins," Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said. "Or we can live up to our ideals as Americans and Catholics and find a compassionate path forward."
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Once in the U.S., the Irish immigrants who suffered the famine mainly settled in Boston and New York, where they were labeled "aliens" by the press, subjected to economic and social exploitation and discrimination, and attacked by American Protestant mobs. The experience was replicated in other major U.S. cities to which the Irish migrated.

Today, more than 40 million Americans, or 15% of the U.S. population, claim Irish descent. The Chicago Tribune reported by 1850, one of every five Chicagoans was Irish. According to the American Enterprise Institute in 2023, Cook County, which includes Chicago and some Illinois suburbs, has the greatest concentration of Americans of Irish descent out of all counties in the U.S., with more than 430,000 residents.

In his remarks for the commemoration, Cupich referred to the 1997 statement attributed to then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the 150th anniversary of "Black '47," the peak of Irish famine deaths and emigration in 1847: "That 1 million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today."

Cupich further warned that Americans and Catholics should heed the lessons of what happened to the Irish, and how these immigrants were treated both in Ireland and in the United States.

"We must pray that we feel that pain and resolve that this inhumanity not be repeated in our time — that future generations do not look back on the history of our nation and rank our present actions among those that stain its reputation," said the cardinal.

"This country of immigrants can choose to ignore its past mistakes — all vigorously justified at the time — and add another to our national sins," he said. "Or we can live up to our ideals as Americans and Catholics and find a compassionate path forward."

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Franciscan Sisters Therese Ann Quigney and Maryann Dosen, who both attended the wreath-laying ceremony and the All Souls Mass afterward, told OSV News they thought of the current situation in the U.S. as they listened to O'Donovan's speech.

"It is a concern that both of us expressed that the people here, right now ... they're not being starved, but they're being treated very inhumanely," said Sr. Therese. Her father emigrated from Ireland to Cleveland in 1949.

Referring to recent media reports, Sr. Therese, superior of her small congregation in Lemont, Illinois, told OSV News, "They're putting them in a detention center that was meant for a two-day stay and they're there (for) weeks. There isn't always enough food. There aren't enough places for them to sleep. It is inhumane, and it is just so non-American."

Similarly to the Irish immigrants who fled the famine, the immigrants most vulnerable to the current U.S. immigration crackdown under the Trump administration are also Catholic. According to a joint Catholic-Evangelical report published in 2025 by World Relief, 80% of those at risk of Trump's mass deportation effort across the country are Christian, with the largest proportion — 61% — being Catholic. The report found one in six Catholics (18%) are either vulnerable to deportation or live with someone who is.

The Chicago area's Broadview immigration processing center has been the flashpoint for tense confrontations between Immigrations and Customs Enforcement and protesters, media and rights lawyers, who have highlighted conditions at the center.

Catholic groups in Chicago have also protested, alleging that Catholic detainees are being denied attempts to bring them the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. The day before the Great Hunger commemoration, a delegation of clergy, religious sisters and laity, together with a Chicago auxiliary bishop, were barred for the second time in three weeks from bringing the Eucharist to migrants being held at an ICE detention center in Broadview after celebrating Mass for the feast of All Saints.

The Trump administration has ramped up arrests of immigrants lacking legal authorization to be in the U.S. no matter how long they lived in the country or under what circumstances, with ICE operations focused on Chicago, Los Angeles, Memphis and other cities across the U.S. CBS News reported Oct. 27, based on internal government data, that 260,000 immigration arrests have taken place so far during President Donald Trump's second term.

Under Trump's "Operation Midway Blitz" in Chicago, neighbors and those who minister to people without proper immigration authorization have described to OSV News living in a culture of fear, with people afraid to go to church, to work or to take their children to school.

Bill O'Sullivan, president of Chicago Gaelic Park, told OSV News after the wreath-laying and Mass, that speaking personally, "like most Chicagoans and most people in this country, we're not all very far removed from immigrant parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents."

He added, "We are not political and I can't speak for Gaelic Park, but I do think it's sad when we don't seem to value other people the way I'd like to see us value other people."

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