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Pope Leo XIV greets people from the popemobile while riding through St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 1, 2025, after celebrating Mass. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

by NCR Staff

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Pope Leo XIV appealed for greater consideration for the "spiritual rights" of migrants in the United States, saying church ministers should be allowed to provide pastoral care to detained people who have often lived peacefully in the country for years.

Leaving the Castel Gandolfo papal residence in Italy Nov. 4, Leo was pressed by an English-speaking reporter about Catholic clergy who have not been allowed to administer Communion to migrants at a detention facility near Chicago.

The pope said the church's primary role is to "preach the Gospel." He cited Matthew 25, recalling Jesus' admonition that, at the final judgment, people will be asked how they treated "the foreigner" — whether they welcomed him or not.

"I think there's a deep reflection that needs to be made in terms of what's happening," Leo said, noting that many migrants who have lived for years without causing problems are now being deeply affected by current enforcement measures.

The pontiff urged authorities to permit pastoral workers access to detained migrants, stressing that many have been separated from their families for long periods and face uncertainty about their circumstances.

"Their own spiritual needs should be attended to," he said.

Catholic parishioners and clergy in Chicago attempted to bring the Eucharist to people detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement on Oct. 11 and Nov. 1 at the Broadview ICE Detention Center.

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Some priests say they have repeatedly sought permission to enter local detention facilities to celebrate Mass and distribute Communion, arguing that spiritual care is a fundamental pastoral duty.

According to organizers from the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership in Chicago, the attempts to provide sacraments have been blocked or restricted by facility rules and security protocols, prompting appeals to local authorities and public protests outside detention centers.

In a recent interview with National Catholic Reporter, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago has also criticized ICE's decision to block clergy from bringing Communion to the detainees. He called it "a violation of religious freedom" and emphasized that "there is no harm to the government in allowing us to minister."

Many immigrant advocates will likely hope the pope's comments on this issue will increase pressure on officials, especially as church leaders in Chicago press for clearer policies on access to immigrants in the detention center. They say their efforts here reflect a long-standing pastoral outreach to immigrant communities – and contend that denying sacramental ministry exacerbates the hardship faced by detainees and their families.

Related: ICE again prevents Chicago Catholics from bringing Eucharist to immigrant detainees

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