News



Bishop Brendan Cahill. (Courtesy of the Diocese of Victoria in Texas)



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Just one week after Donald Trump, who promised mass deportations in his presidential campaign, was elected last November, the Catholic bishops gathered and elected new committee chairs. For migration, they chose Victoria, Texas, Bishop Brendan Cahill, who leads a diocese of about 100,000 Catholics on Texas' Gulf Coast. About a quarter of the diocese's 50 parishes have a Spanish Mass.

The soft-spoken bishop has spent much of the first year of Trump's term as chair-elect of the migration committee. During that time, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops worked to adjust to the end of its collaboration with the federal government on the federal refugee admissions program and develop a pastoral approach for the nearly 1-in-5 U.S. Catholics who are either at risk of deportation or live with someone who is.

On Tuesday (Nov. 11), El Paso, Texas, Bishop Mark Seitz gave his final update as outgoing committee chair before handing the reins to Cahill. Seitz announced through the bishops' immigration justice campaign, You Are Not Alone, they would focus on accompaniment, emergency support and public solidarity with immigrant families, as well as communicating church teaching.

RNS spoke with Cahill on the sidelines of the fall bishops' meeting on Tuesday about his priorities as migration chair and his approach to his detractors. The interview was conducted before the bishops released a statement opposing mass deportations. It has been edited for length and clarity.

RNS: What in your life and ministry experiences will inform how you lead the migration committee?

Cahil: I'm from Houston, and I grew up as a Catholic. I've been a priest for 35 years. In Houston, I would serve in Spanish Mass and English Mass, and (for) the different communities there — Vietnamese and Korean and a diversity of cultures in the area. That's probably from my original experience of priesthood (with) multicultural diversity within the Catholic Church. I have a special love and background for African American Catholic ministry, the Black Catholic community.

In Houston, a Catholic worker movement is present, Casa Juan Diego. Probably for about 10 years, I would celebrate a monthly Spanish Mass there with immigrants. I would commit to that as being present with the immigrant community.

As a bishop now for 10 years in South Texas and Victoria, the community, they don't identify by (legal) status. As long as I've been a priest, the legal status of people who are here — the changes of it and confusion of it — that's a long-term problem. It's been 40 years.

How has Trump's mass deportation campaign impacted your diocese?

The big initiative that we're focusing on is You Are Not Alone. In our area, in the first months, we were trying to figure out what's going to happen. We used the Know Your Rights campaign with CLINIC (Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.), and it was educational for American citizens to remember these are our rights of due process. We can't determine who's entitled to these rights.

(We have) legal advice for families having to prepare for different eventualities. What would happen if one member of the family is deported and the others stay? (How do you) make sure you keep your property and no one can take it from you? I found in our case, the Mexican consulate helped a lot.

Over time, you get nervous. It's almost like a calm before a storm. You wonder what's going to happen, but you prepare the best for it. And we live on the Gulf Coast, right? So kind of preparing for a hurricane.

There are some individuals who will have an appointment with immigration court. It's accompaniment to either visit someone if they're in a detention center, (or in) immigration court, have somebody accompany (them). Longer term, for people who do return to the country of origin, a ministry (has) communication with them.

Trying to work with Congress, I would hope there's a certain sense of urgency with our congressional leaders. We'll keep pushing advocacy, but the main thrust of our

work right now is being present with the community. The Catholic Church is with actually everyone. We're pastors of both the ICE agents and the immigrants. We're all Catholics and united.

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It sounds like in your diocese there's been more fear and anticipation rather than a lot of detentions.

That may be fair to say. We're a rural farming diocese. It's not like these big cities with millions of people, and we're different than what you see on TV. It also may be why I feel like we are in touch with people, because we have smaller parishes. The priest and people really know each other. So if someone's not there, say Mass attendance has gone down a little bit, you kind of know where everyone is, right?

I think that's a sense of what we're trying to do on a national level: communicate with people, "Hey, we're there with you. We know you. How are you doing? How are things going?" If the person is deported back to the country of origin, see how they're doing. We're working on that as well.

Can you tell me more about accompaniment after people are deported?

We belong to Osmeca, a group of bishops who work with migration from Central America, Caribbean, United States and Canada. Now that I've been elected as chair for migration, I've gone to a couple of meetings with this group. The same energy that had been used before on pastoral care of migrants who were traversing north is (now) how to take pastoral care returning home. The reality is, some countries have more resources than others. Some countries have governments that you can work better with.

It's one body of Christ. It's the one group of bishops. Ultimately, we have to care for every individual person. We want to keep up with everybody. Take care of them, and to see Jesus Christ in them. Sometimes we view the other as an object of my charity, like I'm doing something for someone. The Scripture teaches us that person is revealing to me the face of Christ. And so, how am I treating Jesus? How am I not abandoning this person in their time of loss?

It is just that basic humanity of the individual? For me, try to bring it down from the big news you see on TV to the individual in your parish, and to know that person and to accompany them. The gospel is you love everyone without exception. But our particular concern right now is for the immigrant struggling.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio spoke in his presidential address about pushback he's gotten from Catholics who are entrenched in their partisan worldview. Do you have thoughts about how to shift hearts and minds?

Maybe it's personality. I'm OK with political debate. We have to respect the humanity of everybody, even the person I disagree with. I would have to listen to the other person and be attentive to their point of view. Even if it's a situation where I see this as a power differential (and) I'm trying to help a person without power to gain just certain rights, I have to treat the other person with total respect if I'm disagreeing with them.

Try not to be dismissive or use negative terminology about anyone, not to categorize anyone by label. We say no one's illegal — you shouldn't label a person. Well, we shouldn't label someone on the other side.

It's a little personal thing, but I always say, 'I don't know the other person, so I can't judge them.' And so, I need to listen to them, accept them. But also I hope they accept my point of view and don't label me or knock me down. But I can live with it. I can only control myself in that kind of context. I cannot lose my love and respect for the person who even is insulting me. That's our Christian belief.

I don't think I'm going to suffer nearly as much as the martyrs suffered, and the martyrs always forgave their persecutors. They had a pure heart. I'm very convicted of nonviolence. I believe in Martin Luther King. I have to pray for purity of heart. I cannot get caught up in insult for insult. I'm OK taking it. I even joke about it. I say, I still have brothers and sisters, my mom. I still got people who love me, so as long as they love me, I'll be OK. (The moral issue of immigration) seems pretty clear, but I also have to be able to listen to the other person's concerns.

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