News



The Nativity outside St. Susanna Parish in Dedham, Massachusetts. It has received criticism from the Boston Archdiocese and ICE acting director Tod Lyons, as well as strong online backlash. (Courtesy of Steve Josoma)



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December 8, 2025
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Calling it a "politically divisive display," the Boston Archdiocese has asked a local suburban parish to remove a Nativity scene that substitutes images of the Holy Family with a sign criticizing the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign.

"ICE was here," reads the large sign that accompanies an empty manger outside St. Susanna Church in Dedham, Massachusetts, referring to immigration raids conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"The Holy Family is safe in The Sanctuary of our Church," the sign adds. "If you see ICE, please call LUCE," referring to an immigrant assistance network in Massachusetts.

Reported last week by local and national media, the Nativity scene at St. Susanna's prompted strong online reactions. ICE acting director Tod Lyons told Fox News Digital that the scene was "abhorrent" and that it added to a "dangerous narrative" that he said has resulted in a 1,150% increase in assaults on ICE officers.

Hundreds of people from across the country also flooded the parish Facebook group page with angry comments while parishioners defended the provocative manger display.



Close-up of the sign in the outdoor Nativity scene at St. Susanna Parish in Dedham, Massachusetts. (Courtesy of Fr. Steve Josoma)

"It sure seems like it's hard to have a conversation with people," Fr. Stephen Josoma, the pastor of St. Susanna Church, told National Catholic Reporter. Josoma said the parish office received numerous calls where people started cursing as soon as he picked up the phone.

"It's not a conversation," Josoma said. "You say 'Have a nice day' and hang up. You can't do much more than that."

Josoma spoke with NCR a day before a spokesman for the Boston Archdiocese said that the parish manger scene should be removed and the manger restored "to its proper sacred purpose."

"The people of God have the right to expect that, when they come to church, they will encounter genuine opportunities for prayer and Catholic worship — not divisive political messaging," Terrence Donilon, a spokesman for the archdiocese, said in response to NCR's inquiry.

Donilon said in an email that the Catholic Church's canonical norms "prohibit the use of sacred objects for any purpose other than the devotion of God's people," adding that those objects include images of the Christ Child, which Donilon said "are to be used solely to foster faith and devotion."

Donilon added that St. Susanna Church "neither requested nor received permission" from the archdiocese to "depart from this canonical norm or to place a politically divisive display outside the church."

In a prepared statement provided Dec. 8 to NCR, Josoma and members of St. Susanna's parish council said they were waiting for "an opportunity of dialogue and clarity" with Boston Archbishop Richard Henning before reaching any final decisions regarding the Nativity scene.

They defended the parish Nativity as "faithful to the Gospel and Catholic teaching" and a "prophetic reflection that challenges the faithful to find new paths to bring the Good News announced that first Christmas to all of God's people."

They also pointed out that the Vatican itself displays different themed Nativity scenes each year highlighting social issues to contemporary life.

"Some of these have also been controversial (like one focused on the plight of refugees in 2016) all moving beyond static traditional figures and designed to evoke emotion and dialogue," the statement said, adding that it was the parish's hope to similarly evoke dialogue around an issue that is at the heart of contemporary life.

"That some do not agree with our message does not render our display sacrilegious or is the cause of any 'scandal' to the faithful," the statement said.



Agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detain a man after conducting a raid at the Cedar Run apartment complex in Denver Feb. 5, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)

St. Susana Church is one of several churches that have changed their traditional Nativity displays this year to highlight immigration concerns. One church in Illinois depicts Roman soldiers wearing ICE vests, the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph donning gas masks and the Christ Child's hands bound with zip ties.

In his interview with NCR, Josoma said the Gospel is clear about treating immigrants with respect. He noted the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' recent "special message" where the bishops expressed their solidarity with migrants amid the federal government's immigration crackdown.

"And we've had the privilege of assisting 10 refugee families to resettle in the area since 2018," said Josoma, who added that those families originated from Burundi, Afghanistan, Honduras, Guatemala and Myanmar.

Josoma said that his parish's Pax Christi Peace and Justice Group has used the parish manger scene in previous years to also highlight issues pertaining to migration, gun violence and climate change.

"Every year we try to hold up a mirror to the world and say, 'If the Incarnation took place this year, what would that look like?'" said Josoma, who added that the idea is to reflect the celebration of Christmas and the Incarnation with the reality of "the world around us."

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"We've done this since 2016. It came out of our parish Pax Christi group. It really strikes at people and it gets the conversation going," Josoma said.

In 2018, St. Susanna Church also attracted national attention when its Nativity scene depicted the Christ Child in a cage and the three Wise Men behind a wall. The scene was designed to protest the first Trump administration's policy of separating families at the border, Josoma said.

That earlier controversial Nativity scene was cited by C.J. Doyle, executive director of the Catholic Action League of Massachusetts, in a prepared statement where he described this year's manger scene as "another tawdry act of political grandstanding by a priest who believes that his parish church is his personal soapbox."

Doyle commended the archdiocese for criticizing the St. Susanna Nativity scene, adding that "faithful Catholics of Dedham" could now look forward to "a traditional Nativity scene, reminding them, in joyous expectation, of the birth of Our Savior."

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