Opinion

NCR Voices



A sign reading "ICE Was Here" stands in the outdoor Nativity at St. Susanna Catholic Church in Dedham, Massachusetts, Dec. 8, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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The controversy over St. Susanna's Nativity display highlights the sectarian sensibilities of many of the lay faithful in the U.S. church at this time, the lack of imagination among some hierarchs and the perennial difficulty in drawing lines between the sacred and the profane.

St. Susanna's pastor, Fr. Stephen Josoma, removed the Holy Family from the Nativity scene, and put in a large sign that read "ICE was here." Underneath was a smaller sign that read: "The Holy Family is safe in The Sanctuary of our Church," the sign adds. "If you see ICE, please call LUCE," a reference to Massachusetts' immigrants assistance network.

The symbolism was obvious: The Holy Family, whom we are told in the Gospel of Luke fled to Egypt to avoid the tyrant Herod's demonic plans, is still fleeing in the person of the poor and the migrant to avoid the demonic plans of the Trump administration. Josoma told my colleague Brian Fraga that the church has made similar statements with its Nativity scenes in the past. "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?' "

That is a sincere question but a complicated one. If anything is obvious about the Incarnation when it happened in Bethlehem, it is that everyone was surprised, very, very surprised. Trying to figure out what God would have to say to us here and now is not the kind of mental, imaginative exercise that invites the kind of surprise God tends to deliver. That said, if we do not understand that Jesus remains present in the migrant as well as in the Mass, there has been a dis-Incarnation.

Further, no one can doubt the priest's good intentions: The church must demonstrate its commitment to our immigrant brothers and sisters. It should err on the side of boldness not caution in doing so given the stakes of the moment, stakes imposed by the draconian policies of the Trump administration.



A figurine of the Christ Child is displayed in a Nativity scene at a home in Chicani, Bolivia, Dec. 7, 2020. (OSV News/Reuters/David Mercado)

If I were a pastor, I would not use a Nativity scene to make political statements of this kind. And, if I did, I would make sure the statements were even-handed politically. As far as we know, Josoma has never used the Nativity scene to focus on injustice perpetrated on the unborn. So, maybe, keep the ICE statement up until Christmas Eve, then return Mary and Joseph, but not the baby Jesus to the manger scene, with a different sign: "Planned Parenthood was here."

The problem with either sign is that Christ is never absent after the Resurrection. He is continually present to his church here and now.

Which brings us to the response from the Archdiocese of Boston. It was inadequate. If ever there was a time for a teaching moment, this was it. Citing canonical norms that "prohibit the use of sacred objects for any purpose other than the devotion of God's people" does not live up to the moral enormity of the attack on our migrant

Catholic community, the very real fear in which they are living, the very real destruction of legal norms and the invidious disruption to migrant families and parish communities when ICE sweeps through.

Here was a chance for Boston Archbishop Richard Henning to teach. He could have preached on the need for the celebration of Christmas to unite the faithful, not divide them, while also pointing out that we unite around a body of teaching, some of it ethical, some of it explicitly ethical, and that teaching explicitly tells us to welcome the stranger. He could have echoed Cardinal Timothy Dolan's famous talk at the 2012 Al Smith dinner, and preached about the church standing with the "un's," those whom society defines by what they lack, the undocumented and the unborn and the unemployed.

He could have announced that this coming year, the Boston delegation for the Right to Life march will not go to the political heart of the nation, but to, say, the Shrine of the Jesuit Martyrs in upstate New York or the Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette which is right there in Massachusetts. Henning could have huddled with Fr. Bryan Hehir, one of the gems of the Boston presbyterate, and drafted a smart, poignant talk to be given at the Kennedy School about the difficulty in drawing the line between the sacred and the profane. He did none of these things.

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It must be noted that this is the second time in a month that Henning failed to meet the moment on the migration issue. He chaired the drafting committee that devised the statement the U.S. bishops issued at their Baltimore meeting in November. The text presented to the bishops started with too many statements in the passive voice: "We are disturbed …," "We are concerned …" and "We are saddened …" Only when Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich proposed an amendment saying the bishops "oppose the indiscriminate deportation of people" did the statement gain the strength it needed.

We in the press room had not received a copy of the text when Henning stood up to move its adoption. He said the document was "balanced" causing several of us in the media room to look quizzically at each other. What was being balanced? The human dignity of migrants versus what? Trump's ego?

As far as we can tell, Henning is no culture warrior. I hear good things about him from my priest friends in Boston. I am sure he does care about the migrants. But the response of the archdiocese to this controversy sends the wrong signal to the migrant community and to the wider community. The message sent is: We cave to right-wing pressure. If Josoma had used this year's Nativity scene to protest abortion, would the archdiocese have issued the statement it did?

Only foolish people think it is easy to draw the line between the sacred and the profane, between religion and politics. But it is difficult not to conclude that the archdiocese missed an opportunity to express effectively the church's solidarity with our immigrant brothers and sisters.

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