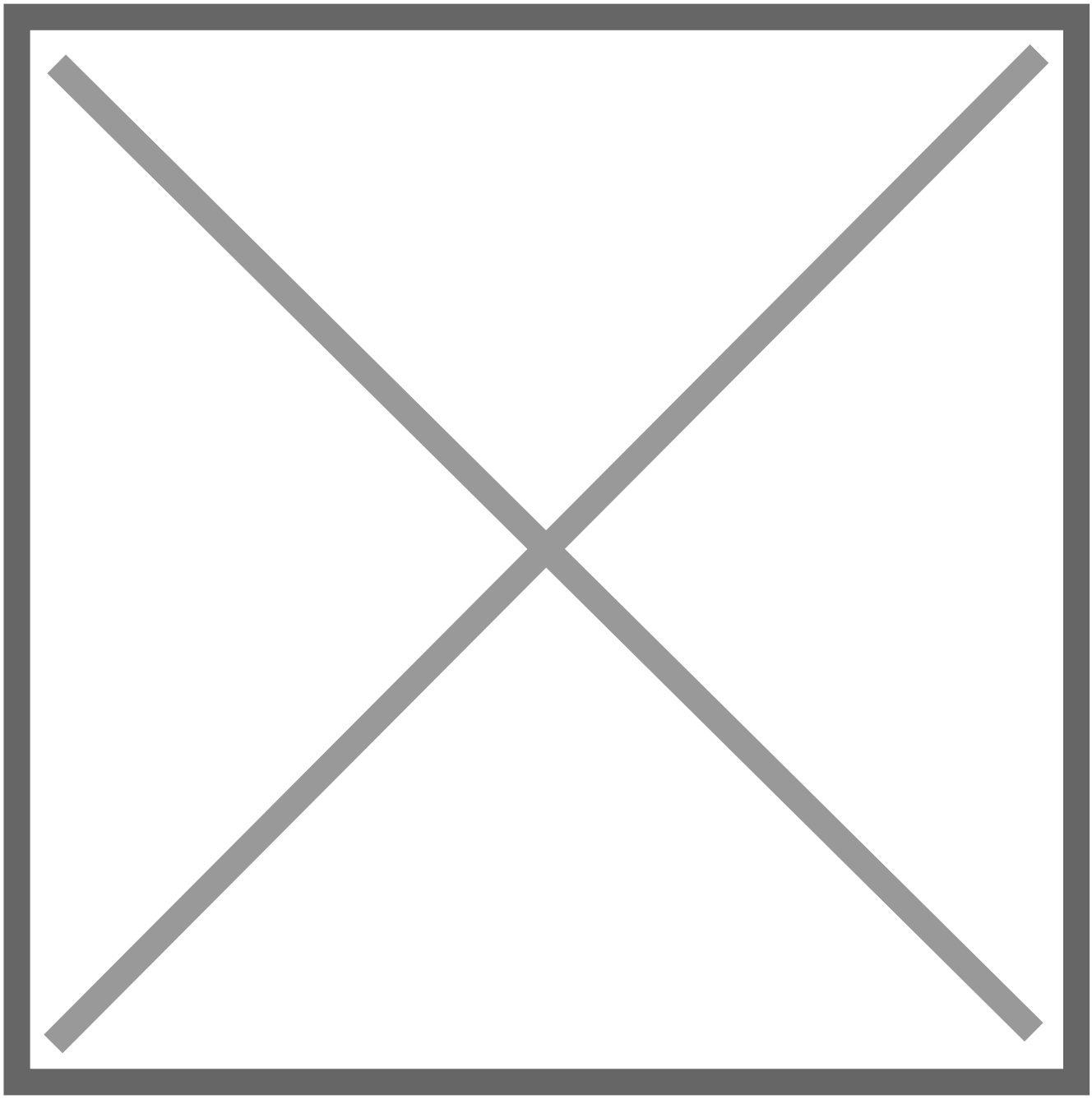
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Pope Leo XIV and Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, meet at the Vatican Feb. 9, 2026. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — February 13, 2026

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All Catholics are called to stand together by reaching out to their brothers and sisters in the faith of all ethnicities, especially those of Hispanic heritage, Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, said.

"They are our brothers and sisters, we love them, and we stand with them in these difficult times," he told Catholic News Service Feb. 11 during a visit to Rome and the Vatican, which included a private meeting with Pope Leo XIV Feb. 9.

"Our Holy Father has been a great source of encouragement and support for the United States bishops, I think, to be very strong in our statements and in our support for the immigrant community back home," he said. "Our Holy Father feels very strongly about this."

"I had the opportunity to speak with him, and I can say in the conversation, you could see that this was a matter of great concern for him," said the archbishop whose archdiocese had seen sustained activity by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known by its acronym ICE, in its communities, including near some parishes.

When it comes to immigration and religious liberty, one major concern is allowing the Catholic Church to provide the sacraments and pastoral care inside some detention facilities, he said; the archbishop is chair of the Committee for Religious Liberty of the USCCB.

"There have been some difficulties there in some places, and so we're keeping a very close eye on that to make sure that the religious rights of those in the detention centers are protected so that they can receive pastoral care and especially the sacraments from the church's ministers," he said.

Sample said what had him most worried was when ICE officials "began showing up outside of churches and places of worship" in his archdiocese, causing "a great deal of doubt and fear and anxiety among our people — people afraid to go to Mass."

While ICE activity seemed to be less aggressive as of late, he said, "there has to be a better solution here to solving the immigration problem we have in the United States."

"We have a system that isn't working. But in terms of the folks that are already here, and especially when I think of the people in my own archdiocese who have been here sometimes for years and years and have established themselves, there has to be a more just, more humane, just a better way to go about this," he said.

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When asked how Catholics in his archdiocese could best accompany those possibly at risk of arrest or detention, he encouraged the English-speaking community to reach out to and build a real connection with those in the Hispanic community.

"Sometimes it feels like maybe (there are) two communities worshiping in the same building," he said of English- and Spanish-speaking Catholics.

Launching a call for unity, peace and mutual support, the archbishop said Catholics of every ethnicity need to "see themselves as one and to really reach out to our brothers and sisters in the Hispanic community, especially right now … just get to know them, welcome them, help them, know that they are loved and very much a part of the body of Christ."

Portland has seen ongoing protests in response to ICE operations, particularly near its facility where people are detained and interviewed to determine their legal status as U.S. residents.

While ICE and other agencies are meant to stop and detain people suspected of being in the U.S. illegally, they have been accused of overly aggressive action and routinely going beyond what the law allows with entering homes, making arrests without judicial warrants and removing people believed to be unauthorized immigrants through mass deportations.

Pope Francis released a formal letter to U.S. bishops last February, addressing the "major crisis" taking place and criticizing efforts to equate the illegal status of some migrants with criminality.

While every nation has the right to defend itself and to keep communities safe from those who have committed violent or serious crimes, the late pope wrote, mass deportations harm human dignity and families. "An authentic rule of law is verified precisely in the dignified treatment that all people deserve, especially the poorest and most marginalized."

Sample also released his own statement in November, reacting to increased ICE activity in Portland. That came just a few days before the U.S. bishops as a whole released a special message Nov. 12 underlining that "human dignity and national security are not in conflict. Both are possible if people of goodwill work together."

Leo supported the U.S. bishops' message, telling reporters Nov. 13, "If someone is in the United States illegally, there are ways to address this. There are courts. There is a judicial system."

"I believe there are many problems in the system. No one has said that the United States should have open borders," he said, adding, "I think every country has the right to determine who enters, how, and when."

However, the U.S. pope said, "when people have lived good lives — many of them for 10, 15, 20 years — treating them in a way that is, to say the least, extremely disrespectful, and with instances of violence, is troubling."

Leo invited all Catholics and people of goodwill to "listen carefully" to the bishops' message. "I believe we must seek ways of treating people with humanity, with the dignity that is theirs."

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