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U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, Democrat of Connecticut, led a group of Catholic Democrats in publishing a statement explaining how their faith influences their views on immigration as Congress debates reforming U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (RNS/AP/J. Scott Applewhite, file)

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Some 40-plus Catholic Democrats in Congress have issued what amounts to a theological rebuke of House Speaker Mike Johnson's scriptural defense for President Donald Trump's mass deportation agenda, outlining a series of religious principles as a deadline loomed for lawmakers to fund the Department of Homeland Security.

The group's Feb. 13 statement, led by Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro and shared first with Religion News Service, lists a series of ideals drawn from Catholic social teaching that the lawmakers say they consider when approaching immigration issues.

"First, we affirm that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families," the statement reads. "Sacred Scripture consistently reminds us of our obligation toward the vulnerable and displaced. Jesus himself identifies with the migrant when he says, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' "

The statement refers to Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, noting that the pontiff argues the Catholic Church "knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community."

The statement also says a nation has the right to "regulate its borders and to control immigration," but doing so "is never a license for cruelty, indifference, or dehumanization." It adds: "Border enforcement must be governed by justice and mercy."

The lawmakers then pivot to a critique of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, saying federal agents working for the agencies have "too often … failed this moral standard." DHS agents, the lawmakers say, have "separated families, removed law abiding individuals from our communities, and tragically, contributed to the deaths of detained migrants and citizens like Renee Good and Alex Pretti."

The statement adds: "As leaders in Congress negotiate reforms to ICE and CBP, we must bear the Church's teachings in mind to ensure we are supporting our immigrant brothers and sisters."

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In addition to DeLauro, signers include Reps. Nancy Pelosi, Robert Garcia, Sam Liccardo, Ted Lieu, Gil Cisneros and Nanette Barragan of California; Joaquin Castro and Sylvia Garcia of Texas; Madeleine Dean and Mary Gay Scanlon of Pennsylvania; Betty McCollum of Minnesota; Debbie Dingell of Michigan; Gabe Amo of Rhode Island; and Timothy Kennedy of New York, among others.

The list of signatories does not include all Catholic Democrats, such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. Her absence may reflect disagreements over how lawmakers should respond to Trump's immigration agenda: Whereas the new statement mentions debates over reforming ICE, Ocasio-Cortez is among a subset of Democrats who have long advocated for abolishing the agency altogether.

The statement came the same day as a congressional deadline to negotiate a deal to fund DHS, with Democrats demanding reforms that many Republicans have rejected. Since no deal was reached Feb. 13, the agency will shut down until Congress can reach an agreement — although ICE may continue to function, thanks to more than $70 billion in separate funding approved by Congress for immigration enforcement last year.

The Catholic Democrats' statement concludes by urging fellow Catholics to share it. "As leaders in Congress negotiate reforms to ICE and CBP, we must bear the Church's teachings in mind to ensure we are supporting our immigrant brothers and sisters," it says.

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The letter comes roughly a week after Johnson was asked by a reporter to respond to Pope Leo's November comments on the U.S. government's approach to immigration. Leo, like his predecessor Pope Francis, has been openly critical of Trump's immigration policies. He referenced the same Bible passage mentioned in the lawmakers' letter, Matthew 25:35: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

In response, Johnson, a Southern Baptist, argued that while the Bible calls on believers to "welcome the sojourner," the command is "an admonition to individuals, not to the civil authorities." He also said that Romans 13 describes civil authorities as "agents of wrath to bring punishment upon the wrongdoer" and that

"assimilation" of immigrants "is expected and anticipated."

"Sovereign borders are biblical and right, and they're just," said Johnson, who later posted a longer version of his argument on social media. "It's not because we hate the people on the outside, it's because we love the people on the inside."

Johnson’s interpretation has been rejected by religious figures such as the Rev. William Barber II, a longtime activist and advocate for the poor, who has challenged the speaker to a debate.



The Rev. William Barber II speaks during a news conference on the 30th day of a government shutdown, on Capitol Hill, Oct. 30, 2025, in Washington. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

Meanwhile, outrage over the president's immigration agenda has grown steadily over the past year among left-leaning religious Americans. Dozens of religious denominations and organizations have sued the administration over immigration policies implemented under Trump, and faith groups have protested and condemned the president's mass deportation efforts. Individual Catholic bishops, as well as the

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have also spoken out — especially after the killings of protesters by federal agents — echoing criticisms voiced by Leo.

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At the same time, the administration has used Scripture to promote ICE and defend its immigration agenda.

Pushback to DHS by some has grown so intense that the Democrats' statement may not satisfy some of the administration's loudest religious critics. Last week, DeLauro sparred in front of press with a group of clergy who met with her to discuss the president's immigration agenda, with several of the religious leaders — including Sr. Mary Ellen Burns, a Catholic nun and immigration attorney — expressing dismay over the actions of ICE agents or, in some cases, insisting that Congress abolish the agency.

In a sometimes tense exchange that followed, DeLauro told clergy she would not vote to eradicate ICE but said she shared many of their concerns about the agency and the actions of federal agents.

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