News



Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich places ashes on the forehead of an attendee at the Ash Wednesday Mass near Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, Feb. 18, 2026, in Melrose Park, a Chicago suburb. (Courtesy of Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership/Gordon Mayer)



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Standing outdoors on a cold Ash Wednesday evening, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago framed Lent as a public reckoning with fear, invisibility and faith lived under pressure in the immigrant community.

As ashes were prepared and families gathered near Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Melrose Park, Cupich's homily drew a straight line between the ancient ritual of dust and the modern reality of detention, deportation and family separation.

"God does not need papers to know who or where you are," he said. "The world may look at your legal status, but God looks at your heart."

The outdoor Mass and community procession marked the start of Lent for thousands of Catholics organized by the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership, or CSPL, and the Scalabrinian Missionaries. It came days after a federal judge ordered the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to allow clergy access to the Broadview ICE detention facility for Ash Wednesday services.

More than 3,000 people — including relatives of those detained or deported — attended the Mass and walked the streets of Melrose Park in a peaceful procession. Families affected by immigration enforcement were among the first to receive ashes from Cupich, in a highly symbolic reversal of the marking and tracking many say defines their daily lives.



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, speaks at St. Lucy's Church in Newark Jan. 13, 2025, during an interfaith gathering of religious leaders committed to supporting immigrants facing the threat of mass deportation by the Trump administration. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, as well, began Ash Wednesday by celebrating Masses inside Delaney Hall detention center in Newark, where he met with women detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, emphasizing the church's responsibility to uphold human dignity in places of confinement. Tobin said starting the day with detainees was his priority before later celebrating Mass at St. Patrick's Pro-Cathedral.

Accompanied by auxiliary bishops from the Archdiocese of Newark, Tobin told Religion News Service that the Masses inside the facility were both sorrowful and marked by courage.

Cupich, in his homily, said: "This too is a day for those who are made to feel like dust, dust that can be swept away or treated as if they do not belong. It is a day for those who work with the dust of the earth in construction, in cleaning, in harvesting the crops of the fields, all to support their families. Yet, remember from the beginning it is dust that God uses to create humanity."

Cupich's Mass was not a procession to Broadview, as previous public witness events have been, but its location and timing were inseparable from the legal and moral struggle over access to the detention center. On Feb. 12, U.S. District Judge Robert Gettleman issued a preliminary injunction ordering DHS to permit clergy to minister to detainees on Ash Wednesday, writing: "The court finds that the government has substantially burdened plaintiffs' exercise of religion."



A man receives a blessing during an outdoor Mass Nov. 1, 2025, held outside the Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Broadview, Illinois. U.S. District Judge Robert W. Gettleman in Chicago granted a preliminary injunction Feb. 12, 2026, that allows clergy, religious and Catholic social justice advocates to enter the ICE facility on Ash Wednesday Feb. 18 to offer ashes and holy Communion to

detained Catholics. (OSV News/Reuters/Leah Millis)

The ruling followed a lawsuit filed in November by the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership challenging DHS restrictions on prayer and pastoral access.

The group argued that its own religious freedom rights were violated under the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. The court noted that DHS failed to demonstrate a compelling government interest or that its policies were the least restrictive means available.

Late Wednesday morning, DHS notified the group that it would comply with Gettleman's judicial injunction, requiring federal officials to permit a small delegation of clergy and women religious access to the Broadview ICE facility on Ash Wednesday.

Fr. Leandro Fossá, pastor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish where Cupich celebrated Mass, was one of the religious in the delegation that entered the ICE detention center at 3 p.m. CST.

"The importance of the Mass with the people, and then the possibility of going inside the ICE detention, is because we want to guarantee the freedom of religion of this country and the possibility for every person to receive spiritual assistance from their religion," Fossá told NCR.



Scalabrinian Fr. Leandro Fossá, is pastor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Melrose Park, a Chicago suburb. Parishioners support each other amid the immigration crackdown and help each other learn about their legal rights. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

The choice of the parish in Melrose Park was not casual. The west suburban parish is in a neighborhood with a high concentration of families affected by deportation. In September 2025, an undocumented Mexican immigrant father of two, Silverio Villegas González, was fatally shot by ICE agents, an event that shook the parish and prompted novenas, memorial Masses and sustained organizing.

"We built a life together. He worked; he took care of us. He was a good person," Villegas' girlfriend said in an October NCR interview. She's been assisted since then by the parish community.

"We Catholics are moved by hope, despite the difficulties, despite the fear of many who don't go to work without measuring the consequences, many children who go to school and have anxiety because they don't know if — when they go back from

school — their parents are going to be home," said Fossá.

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Over the past year, the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership has organized a series of highly visible religious activities: a people's Mass outside the Great Lakes Naval Station, a Eucharistic procession at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish to grieve Villegas and multiple processions and Masses outside the Broadview facility calling for pastoral care and Communion inside.

During that same period, according to the coalition's lawsuit, ICE has denied access to advocates and clergy, while reports of deteriorating and inhumane conditions inside the facility have increased. Illinois elected officials were also denied access, according to media reports.



Chicago Cardinal Blase J. Cupich speaks at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus in New York City Sept. 26, 2023. Cupich led an outdoor Mass Feb. 18, 2026, in Chicago, which was attended by relatives of those who have been detained or

deported. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

As ashes were imposed outside the Melrose Park parish, Cupich addressed the fear many families carry. "Today many of you live in fear of being marked and tracked, careful about names, identities, and lists," he said. "But today, you step forward freely to receive this mark, the sign of the cross."

He described the cross traced in ash as "more permanent than any government identity or record," telling worshippers, "It is a declaration that no matter what laws change, no matter what politicians say, and no matter what uncertainties you face, you are children of God."

For Fossá, that message has had a tangible effect on parishioners since the start of 2026. "We see hope, and many people say, 'Father, we know that we don't stand alone, and we know that those who do injustice will have to answer to God.' "

"We also see people that are not afraid. They know of the possible consequences, but they are not afraid because they know that they are not alone," he said.

Religion News Service contributed to this story.

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