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An agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, detains a man during an in

An agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, detains a man during an immigration raid in Thermal, Calif., Dec.19, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Daniel Cole)

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A group of U.S. bishops, most from the U.S.-Mexico border region, issued a statement Feb. 24 hours before President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address of his second term, urging several reforms to immigration enforcement.

Hardline immigration policies have been a key part of the president's agenda, but new polling indicates public support of these policies is waning ahead of Trump's Feb. 24 address to a joint session of Congress at the Capitol.

The statement, signed by 20 U.S. bishops, including Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico; Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller of San Antonio; Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas; and Bishop Michael Pham of San Diego identified several specific areas for reform to "help protect the human rights of immigrants and their families."

"We speak out as pastors in border states and beyond concerned about the impact of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) recent and ongoing immigration enforcement activities against individuals and families who are without legal status in our country," the bishops' statement said. "While we acknowledge the right and duty of a sovereign nation to enforce its laws, we also believe that those laws should be upheld in a manner that protects the God-given human dignity and rights of the human person."

The bishops called for ensuring families of mixed immigration status are not separated, citing the unnecessary harm done to their children, and that sensitive locations such as houses of worship, schools, and hospitals, are protected from enforcement actions.

The U.S. bishops' annual report on religious liberty identified the Trump administration's loosened restrictions on Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents from making arrests at houses of worship, schools and hospitals, as well as ensuring those in ICE custody have access to the sacraments, were recently identified as areas of critical concern.

"We consider this an issue of religious freedom — a right enshrined in both the US Constitution and international covenants. Moreover, children should be able to attend school without fear and those in need of urgent medical care should be able to seek treatment with confidence," they stated.

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The statement also called for the restoration of asylum in the immigration system, particularly at the border.

"We also oppose the arrest and detention of law-abiding refugees who have been lawfully admitted to the US, as has been proposed by the Department of Homeland Security, the bishops' statement added.

They also called for an end to intimidation and fear tactics in enforcement efforts.

"The use of masks, random stops without probable cause, roving patrols, and physical abuse of immigrants and others has been well documented," the statement

said. "Such tactics can intimidate immigrants, even those with a legal basis to remain in the US, and prevent them from asserting their rights."

Wester said in a statement the new statement "puts some meat on the bones" of the U.S. bishops' "special pastoral message on immigration," which they overwhelmingly approved at their annual fall plenary assembly in Baltimore in November.

The bishops' letter underscored the special message's opposition to "the indiscriminate mass deportation of people," adding "it is detrimental to the human rights of our fellow human beings and not in the best interest of the nation."

The condemnation of "indiscriminate mass deportation" has a reference point in the Church's magisterium, with the Second Vatican Council naming "deportation" among specific acts it denounced as "offensive to human dignity." St. John Paul II included this list in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* ("Splendor of Truth") and 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life").

The bishops' statement also reiterated the long-held position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that "those immigrants and their families who have built equities in our country and are otherwise law-abiding — the vast majority of the undocumented -- should be given an opportunity to come out of the shadows and earn their citizenship over time, becoming full legal members of and contributors to their communities and the nation."

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It also echoed the Feb. 20 statement by Bishop Brendan Cahill of Victoria, Texas, chair of the USCCB's Committee on Migration, opposing the Trump administration's "deeply troubling" plans to acquire massive warehouses all over the country, each capable of interning thousands.

"We also urge our immigration enforcement officials not to detain vulnerable persons and groups, including families and children, pregnant women, and the disabled," they added. "We also strongly assert that detainees have access to religious and pastoral care, including Mass and the sacraments of the Catholic Church."

A majority of the people targeted by ICE for mass detention and eventual deportation are expected to be Catholics in 6 out of 10 cases, according to a 2025 joint Catholic-Evangelical report published by the USCCB and World Relief. The report also found nearly 1 in 5 Catholics (18%) in the U.S. are either vulnerable to deportation or live with someone who is.

The bishops also called on Congress and the administration to help mitigate the root causes of irregular migration, invest in reintegration programs for deportees, and end the deportation of immigrants to third countries.

"As Congress and the administration deliberate changes to how immigration enforcement is conducted across the nation, we urge them to consider these recommendations," the bishops' statement said. "As always, we stand ready to work with them to create an immigration system which ensures public safety, protects human rights, encourages economic growth and justice, and upholds our heritage as a nation of immigrants."

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