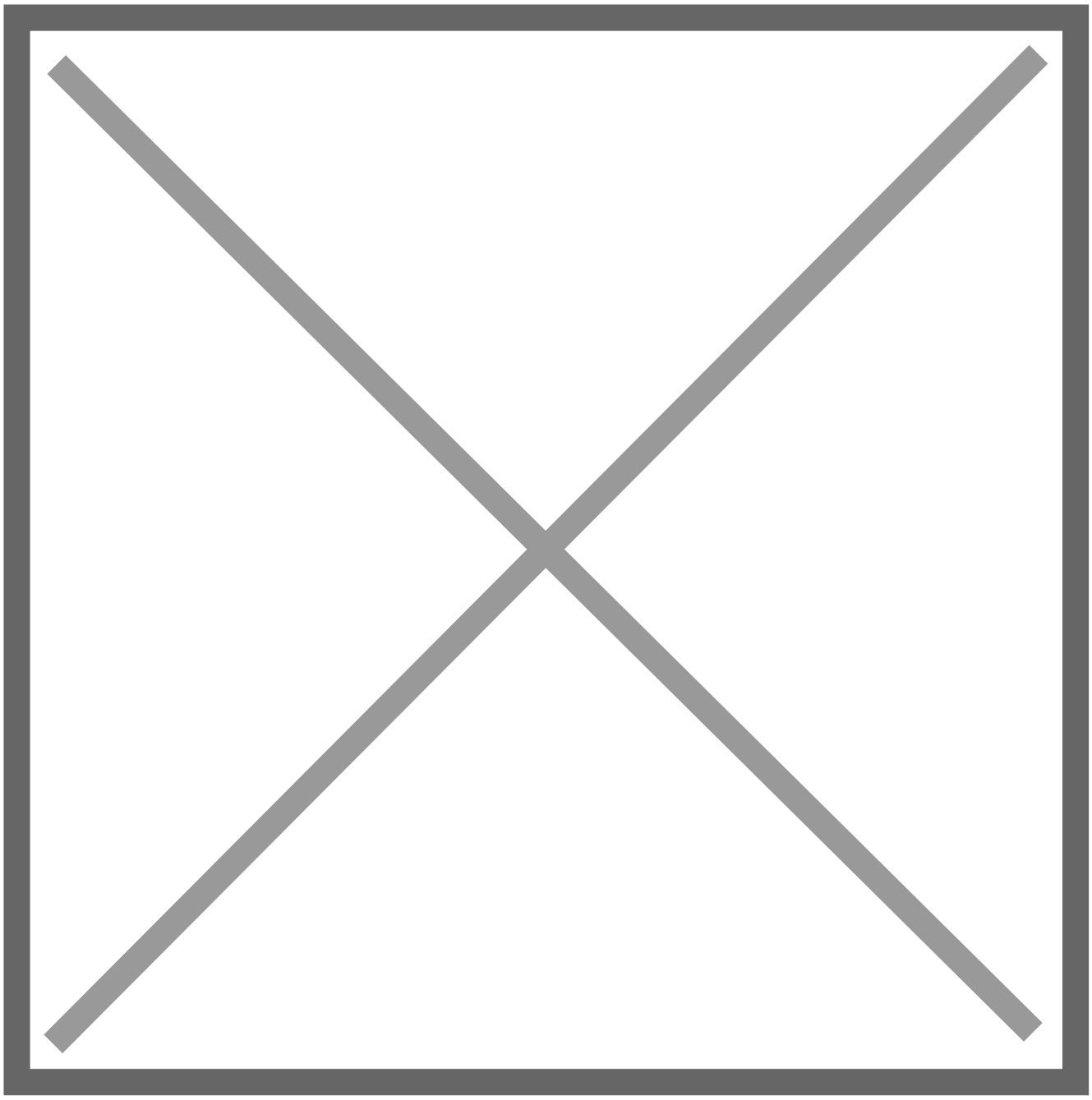
News



Some members of a delegation from the Archdiocese of Baltimore meet with U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., in Washington March 5, 2026, to advocate on behalf of immigrants. (OSV News/Yvonne Wenger)

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"They ask for help, and all I can say is, 'I hear you. I hear you,'" said Deacon Seigfried Presberry as he described the phone calls he receives from families after a loved one is detained by immigration authorities.

Deacon Presberry, the Archdiocese of Baltimore's coordinator of prison ministry, shared those conversations with an aide to U.S. Sen. Angela Alsobrook, D-Md., during meetings on Capitol Hill March 5.

The calls, he explained, often come from desperate relatives searching for someone who can reach their detained family member or provide spiritual support.

His testimony was part of a broader immigration advocacy day in Washington that brought Catholic delegations from several dioceses to meet with members of Congress. The Archdiocese of Baltimore sent a delegation composed of religious leaders, laypeople and Lia García, director of Hispanic ministry.

The Baltimore participants were divided into small groups for meetings with lawmakers and their staff. Their appointments — organized by Michelle Zelaya, associate director of the Maryland Catholic Conference — included U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., and legislative aides for Alsobrooks and three Maryland House members, Democratic Reps. Sarah Elfreth, Kweisi Mfume and Jamie Raskin.

During the meetings, the delegates shared personal experiences from their ministries and urged lawmakers to pursue comprehensive immigration reform that would provide pathways to lawful status and citizenship for unauthorized immigrants while keeping families together.

"The bishops have a long history of advocating for our community," García told the Catholic Review, Baltimore's archdiocesan news outlet, "and what we are asking Congress and our representatives is a path to legalization for our community."

García pointed out that they advocated for those "people who have lived here for years, who pay their taxes, who have families, who have businesses, who have made their lives here."

Another issue raised by the Baltimore delegation was the need to streamline the process for obtaining permanent residency and R-1 religious worker visas for priests serving immigrant communities. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has promoted the Religious Workforce Protection Act to address the problem.

"We have several priests who have been stuck in that process, some who have left the country to visit their families or other places and have found it almost impossible to return," said García, adding that the group asked Congress to review "all those long waiting processes and see if, in some way, they could speed them up because it is our people who are suffering."

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Redemptorist Fr. Ako Walker, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in the Highlandtown neighborhood in Southeast Baltimore, said the meetings also addressed the challenges ministers face when immigrants are detained. Walker also serves as the archdiocesan delegate for Hispanic Catholics.

"We especially talked about what happens after an immigrant is arrested, the difficulty of ministering to these people from the moment of their arrest," said Walker, who emphasized the need for immigration laws that respect the dignity of all people.

Delegates urged lawmakers to ensure that detainees can practice their faith and receive pastoral care.

According to the Archdiocese of Baltimore's public relations department, while U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in some detention centers across the country have permitted priests to celebrate the Eucharist and provide pastoral care, that access has not been granted locally.

In Baltimore, the archdiocese's efforts to offer Mass and provide care packages to inmates has been denied, and clergy visits have been stymied by officials with ICE.

Elsewhere, such access has been granted at ICE "detention facilities." In Maryland, however, detainees are first taken to a "holding facility" in Baltimore before they are transferred out of the state.

The Baltimore delegation also asked lawmakers to support specific legislation, including the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act.

Other Catholic delegations from the archdioceses of Philadelphia and Washington and the dioceses of Camden, New Jersey, and Providence, Rhode Island, also participated in the advocacy day. Providence Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, former auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, was among them.

After the day of lobbying, the delegations gathered at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception for Mass celebrated by Auxiliary Bishop Christopher Cooke of Philadelphia, and concelebrated by Bishop Joseph Williams of Camden.

In his homily, Cooke reflected on human dignity and the mission that had brought the delegations to Washington. He reminded the congregation that every person "has value because of our body and soul in the image and likeness of God as we try to portray to the various people that we encounter today in those offices."

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