News



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, is seen Feb. 26, 2019, at the U.S.-Mexico border wall. (OSV News/David Agren)

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Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, called for an end to mass deportation and redoubled efforts to show solidarity with those affected by that policy in a new pastoral message released March 15.

In the message, which Seitz directed to be read in all parish churches and chapels during the Sunday Masses on the day of release, Seitz said the diocese will "redouble our ministries with those in the downtown courthouse, in the detention centers, in Ciudad Juarez and with families in our parishes."

"We will continue to celebrate your contributions to our community, to defend your human dignity, and to work to end racism and make immigration reform a reality," the message said.

In an interview with OSV News, Seitz said the message was an effort "to speak to the people of our community, particularly those who are living in fear right now," which he said even includes "those who have legal documents, who we've seen arrested and detained, even deported."

The message comes after some news reports indicated the White House and top Republican officials have told members of their party on the ballot in November to avoid discussing "mass deportations" on the campaign trail, as polls show Trump's immigration policy has become unpopular among most U.S. adults.

At his recent State of the Union address, Trump, who has made hardline immigration policies a cornerstone of his agenda, spoke about border security rather than deportation.

Asked if the shift in rhetoric corresponds to any changes in El Paso, Seitz said they have observed "a pause on many of their activities" but "we're very concerned that this is perhaps only a pause and not an end to this kind of action."

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The pastoral message expressed solidarity with those who have been adversely affected by the policy of mass deportations, those who have faced immigration enforcement actions outside of their court proceedings, and those who have died in detention facilities in the area.

"Mass deportations will not make our communities safer," Seitz wrote. "They separate families, divide neighbors and threaten our economic wellbeing. While we do need significant immigration reforms, it is an injustice to make families, children and the vulnerable pay the price of our inaction. Policies, laws and borders must always be at the service of human dignity, genuine community security and human flourishing."

Seitz called "the current national campaign of mass detention and deportations" a "grave moral evil, one which must be opposed, with prayer, peaceful action and acts of solidarity with those affected."

"In these acts, we touch the wounds of Jesus Christ, and in this solidarity, we carry forward the hope of the Resurrection. God is on the side of justice, and as we journey towards Easter, we know that God is fashioning a new humanity that reflects God's blessings for all people," he wrote.

Conditions at the Camp East Montana detention facility were among the points of concern Seitz raised in his message. The facility has been the subject of reports of overcrowding and medical neglect, and deaths, including one ruled a homicide.

Seitz told OSV News that providing religious support and access to the sacraments is another concern about the facility.

"We were only able to celebrate one Mass a week for around 100 people," he said, estimating that 70% of detainees there identify as Catholic.

"Non-Catholics coming to the Mass too," he said. "They all need God at that moment, right? So what percentage is that out of 3,000 people? We haven't been able to begin to provide fundamental necessary services to people who are experiencing the worst moment of their lives."

Seitz added in his message that he is "blessed with many friendships with our local law enforcement and immigration enforcement agents. Their work to keep our community safe is vital."

"But the death of those in immigration detention is unacceptable. An unjust immigration system that leads to deadly outcomes is destructive of our shared humanity. No one has to obey an immoral order," he said. "I implore all involved to carefully discern the moral requirements of the Gospel at this moment with integrity and honesty. When we take off our masks and encounter each other as neighbors, we can reclaim our common dignity. I promise the pastoral support of our priests, chaplains and myself as you navigate the demands of conscience with sincerity. You are also in my prayers."

The message also asked Catholics and other community members "who enjoy the privileges of US citizenship" to participate in a March 24 prayer vigil and march to "end to mass detention and deportations and plead for respect for human life." The event will take place at 6 p.m. local time at the Plaza de los Lagartos in El Paso.

Seitz said the event is intended to be "a prayerful presence to show our community and our nation our level of concern about these issues."

Catholic social teaching on immigration balances three interrelated principles — the right of persons to migrate in order to sustain their lives and those of their families, the right of a country to regulate its borders and control immigration, and a nation's duty to regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

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