



Fatou Traore, center, with family. (Courtesy)

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Last week, Bishop Dennis Walsh did something he'd never done before.

Walsh, the bishop for the Catholic diocese of Davenport, Iowa, wrote a letter to the Trump administration urging it to halt the deportation of an Ivory Coast native, who is being held in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention, to Sierra Leone.

While some Catholic leaders have publicly opposed the Trump administration's immigration crackdown, it's uncommon for them to intervene in individual cases. Walsh's letter comes as more clergy and parishioners are raising concerns over the administration ramping up its enforcement operations. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement rounded up 50,000 people in July, the highest since January 2025, according to an [Associated Press](#) analysis of government data.

"This is the only time that I've done that," Walsh said about sending the letter advocating for the woman, Fatou Traore, 43. "The facts I do know just bring into question whether this was a legal detention or not."

The bishop wrote to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin last week to urge him to stop her deportation, which he called a "grave violation of her human dignity and the rights that are intrinsic to each one of us." He asked the secretary to protect "citizens and persons created in the image and likeness of God."

A DHS spokesperson told RNS in an email that the agency "responds to official correspondence through official channels" and that DHS acted lawfully and encouraged "illegal aliens" to self-deport.

Walsh also wrote to Sen. Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa; Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa; and Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, asking them to intervene on Traore's behalf. Grassley said he received Walsh's letter and met with Traore's family twice. He said he informed DHS of his interest in the case. "Fatou has legal representation, and her claims will need to be evaluated by the immigration system. The executive branch is

responsible for enforcing federal immigration laws," he told RNS in a statement. Miller-Meeks said in a statement that she was aware of the case before the bishop contacted her and that she had reached out to Mullin.

Ernst didn't respond to a request for comment.

Catholic leaders across the country have stepped up to denounce the government's immigration enforcement as ICE's surge rattles immigrant communities. One in five Catholic families would be affected by the Trump administration's immigration enforcement, according to a [survey](#) led by Catholic and evangelical organizations in March 2025.

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Faith leaders outside the Catholic Church have also stepped up in support of the case. Lutheran Bishop Amy Current, who leads the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Southeastern Iowa Synod, and United Methodist Bishop Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai, who leads Iowa's UMC Conference, also [wrote](#) this week to Mullin to push for the release of Traore. The ELCA declared itself a sanctuary denomination in 2019, prompting many leaders and congregants to support immigrant communities [through](#) legal clinics, court accompaniment and sometimes shelter. UMC clergy have supported members arrested for protesting ICE and recently [rallied](#) outside of the U.S. Capitol to demand it abolish ICE and Customs and Border Protection.

Walsh's intervention is part of a broader shift toward increased effort by Catholic leaders to challenge the Trump administration's immigration enforcement policies. Last week, Cardinal Blase Cupich of the Archdiocese of Chicago denounced "inhumane immigration enforcement" in a [homily](#). And the Archdiocese of St. Louis sued the Trump administration on Monday (Oct. 5), saying it and a local sheriff are violating the religious rights of clergy and detainees by placing restrictions on clergy who visit a detention center. In 2025, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a [special message](#) opposing the "indiscriminate mass deportation of people" and denouncing the "vilification of immigrants." Pope Leo XIV reacted [saying](#) it was "a very important statement" and that immigration enforcement should aim at "treating people humanely, treating people with the dignity that they have."

The increased involvement from Catholic leaders "speaks to the gravity of the situation," said Dylan Corbett, founder of the Hope Border Institute, which advocates for immigrant rights through research and policy work. "While the bishops' response up to this point has been what they normally do, which is to teach," said Corbett, who previously worked with the Vatican on immigration issues, "now they're reacting to that felt pain. Faith leaders are in proximity to pain right now, and that I think is new."

While Catholic leaders are increasingly speaking out about the administration's immigration enforcement policies, their opposition isn't uniformly shared by Catholics in the pews. Only 19% of Hispanic Catholics said they approve of President Donald Trump's immigration policies as of February 2026, while 53% of white Catholics said they do, according to a [Public Religion Research Institute](#) survey released in March 2026.

Traore was arrested by ICE agents on Sept. 24 after dropping off her younger son at soccer practice. Two unmarked vehicles with ICE agents had been following her when she parked in her sister's driveway around 6:30 a.m., according to her son Esoumaila Diallo. She was transferred to detention centers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska, before being sent to a facility in Monroe, Louisiana. ICE didn't respond to questions about the circumstance surrounding Traore's arrest.

Traore arrived in the U.S. in 2005 during Ivory Coast's first civil war and filed for asylum, her son said. RNS reviewed a withholding of removal order issued in 2011 by New York City's Federal Plaza Immigration Court indicating that her asylum petition was withdrawn and her deportation stayed to avoid deporting her to a country where she could be endangered or tortured. She has been allowed to remain in the U.S. through this withholding of removal.

Walsh said Traore's case was brought to his attention by Iowa City parishioners who are members of the local Catholic Worker community, which has been advocating with other local organizations for her release. On Oct. 6, about 100 people, including members of Traore's family and clergy and nuns from other faiths, rallied outside the Cedar Rapids detention center to demand her release, according to Escucha Mi Voz, an immigrant advocacy group.

Walsh said he was concerned about Traore's deportation to Sierra Leone because she has no connection in the country. Last week, an emergency U.S. Supreme Court

[ruling](#) paused a lower court ruling that had stopped third-country deportations.

Diallo said his mother's detention has disrupted the family equilibrium and created angst among his siblings, who are 14, 8 and 3. He fears for her safety if she is deported to Sierra Leone.

"She can go there and die. She can go there and be homeless. She can go there and God knows what can happen to her," he said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. [View the full series](#).