

There has been a mixed response from the local Church to raids that have led to many Latino Catholics living in fear of being arrested and deported / **By MICHAEL TANGEMAN**

# Fear and loathing in Los Angeles

**L**OS ANGELES – It is 6.45 on a Sunday morning in late August and I've arrived early for the first Mass at Our Lady of the Rosary. The church stands serenely in the early morning sunshine in this majority Hispanic suburb of Paramount, 15 minutes' drive from downtown on the ubiquitous commuter freeways criss-crossing the working-class communities of south-east LA.

The scene seems a far cry from the running street battle in June just a few blocks away, with live-streamed images of police in riot gear facing off against neighbours protesting against arrests of undocumented immigrants in a series of raids by armed federal agents of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or ICE.

This is home turf for me. I was born, baptised, raised and for 12 years attended Catholic schools in these communities. To this day, I can recite all the nearby parishes by name; I no longer live here, but I can visualise nearly every one. Driving through neighbourhood streets, I realise I still know this area like the back of my hand.

I'm prepared for a near-empty church, having read of a local population cowering at home, wary of venturing out for fear of being swept up in ICE arrests. But the church is packed: more than 450 parishioners, nearly eight abreast in each of the 56 pews, another 25 or so standing at the back. After Mass, I speak with the parish pastor, Fr Julio González, who confirms that Catholics here are living "in fear, a lot of fear".

"We've seen a 25 per cent drop at Mass in all the parishes in the area," he tells me. These days, he says, worshippers tend to "come early, before ICE hits the streets, or some don't come at all".

The LA archdiocese is the largest Catholic diocese in the United States, with some 4.3 million faithful – nearly double the number of the next largest, New York. Though Mass is celebrated in 40 languages for Catholics originating in more than 70 countries, Latinos – the Hispanic population of Latin American descent – comprise the overwhelming majority of the faithful. Since June, more than 5,000 people have been arrested here for alleged violation of immigration laws and related charges, the US Department of Homeland Security says. Immigration raids and "snatch arrests" occur daily, often without due process, by masked, unidentified federal agents. When the first arrests sparked mass protest, President Donald Trump sent in the National Guard and US Marines.

I've come to find out how the Church hierarchy and individual Catholics may be



Fr Chris Ponnet takes part in a "Coalition of Faithful Resistance" prayer and protest vigil

responding, how they choose to accompany the faithful living in daily fear of arrest and possible deportation. While awaiting an interview with LA's Archbishop, José H. Gomez, I find myself on a sweltering downtown sidewalk one Friday afternoon in front of the Federal Building, where a group gathered as the "Coalition of Faithful Resistance" are holding a weekly prayer vigil and protest.

Fr Chris Ponnet, a pastor/chaplain at the archdiocesan St Camillus Center, tells me this is where detainees are brought for processing and where ICE and Border Patrol agents were housed early on. "Our primary focus is ICE. They're just kidnapping people, literally, off the street and they're not producing warrants," he says.

"This is not America, these are not our values, not Christian Catholic values. I don't know their hearts and their souls, but their behaviour and policy are consistently evil."

Another coalition participant, ordained Deacon Bruce Clark of Beatitudes of Our Lord parish in La Mirada, is outraged at the indiscriminate immigration round-ups and the separation of families taking place. ICE is arresting people "in a way you wouldn't round up dogs," he says. "You're rounding up people who are human beings, brothers and sisters, children of God. It calls me to step forward to do what I believe is right and oppose what I know is wrong."

"Our conscience and our faith require us to do good and to avoid evil, and ultimately the one place in the Gospel where Jesus gives very specific criteria for our judgement is, 'What did you do for the least of my brethren? I was hungry, did you feed me? I was a stranger, did you welcome me?'" Clark says.

"It's just a very basic gospel message, and I think our country's turning our back on that."

Some tell me not to expect much from the church hierarchy. A Latin American diplomat here says the archbishop "doesn't lift a finger to really help immigrants". Matt Harper, an organiser with the LA Catholic Worker community and the Faithful Resistance coalition, says at times his immigration rhetoric "reads more like Trump talking points than it does the Gospels and Christ – tighten border security, have all employers run background checks on all their workers ... It just doesn't fit the moment.

"They have a 'Treat your neighbour as you want to be treated' sort of philosophy, which is beautiful," he says of the archdiocese. "But, sure, we may treat our undocumented neighbours well. But if they're being assaulted in the streets, what is the archdiocese doing exactly?"

The archbishop's recent statements have seemed to mirror some Trump talking points, such as when he said in June that "we can all agree that we don't want undocumented immigrants who are known terrorists or violent criminals in our communities", and "the previous administration in Washington went too far in not securing our borders". But he has also become more critical of the Trump administration, saying it "has offered no immigration policy beyond the stated goal of deporting thousands of people each day. This is not policy, it is punishment, and it can only result in cruel and arbitrary outcomes."

**A MEXICAN-BORN** naturalised US citizen, Archbishop Gomez has long proposed legislative reform of the US immigration system and has written a book on the subject. Considered a theologically conservative, traditional prelate, he joined the Opus Dei movement at university in Mexico and became a lay numerary member. Theology studies at Opus Dei's University of Navarra in Spain were followed by ordination at the group's main Torreciudad shrine there, then 23 years as an Opus Dei priest in Spain, Mexico and the US. In 2001, Spanish Bishop Javier Echevarría, then the head of Opus Dei, consecrated him as auxiliary bishop of Denver. In 2010, he was Archbishop of San Antonio when Pope Benedict named him coadjutor and a year later Archbishop of Los Angeles. As president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops from 2019-2022, he gained notoriety for his sharp criticism of President Joe Biden over the issue of abortion.

He begins our interview by telling me how much immigrants have contributed to the United States and insisting that politicians in

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Washington need to work together to fix a broken immigration system. I ask him if during the three months of crisis over the raids he has spoken directly with any families about deportations of family members or parents being separated from their children by ICE.

“No, I haven’t talked to any family,” he tells me. Instead, he says, his priests keep him informed. “We had a meeting of priests this past week and there were a large number of priests and they were saying that it’s very sad, especially when there is a separation.”

He explains the archdiocese Office of Immigration coordinates the accompaniment of Catholics when they show up for immigration hearings. At the parish level, the Church provides food deliveries for those afraid to leave their homes. Priests have received detailed guidelines on how to react in various circumstances: should ICE ever raid church premises, for example, or what advice to give parishioners if family members are arrested.

**I ASK HIM** if the Church might become more vocal and visible out on the streets in support of the people. “So far it hasn’t been necessary,” he replies. “But if it gets to the point that we need to be out there, we’ll be out there.”

For those already out on the street, scepticism tinges the hope of more direct Church engagement. Fr Ponnet does see more pastors getting involved. “In East LA, primarily a Latino community, there are 26 parishes – I would say all of them are supporting activities against ICE raids,” he says. “Some of the priests are not going to get out on the street, but they support other people doing it.”

Matt Harper says community coordination and resistance will continue to be key to reducing ICE arrests in majority-Latino areas. “When ICE shows up and a neighbourhood turns out, that’s what’s protecting people,” he tells me. “When organisations and church groups show up to say this law is unjust, that’s what protects us.”

After that first Sunday Mass, I go to a Home Depot DIY centre on Alondra Boulevard in Paramount, directly opposite the ICE staging site where protesters battled police back in June. Usually, a dozen or more mostly undocumented day labourers would be seeking work here. I find just four men, spread out, eyeing me warily.

I speak with Hector, squatting above his tools, who says things are slow, not much work on offer. No, he tells me, ICE has not been around lately. But a convoy of three National Guard troop transports and four or five camouflaged Humvees drove slowly by the other day.

Leaving the car park, I spot the Guards in camo fatigues, helmets and riot shields inside the fence at the ICE centre opposite, two dozen troops ready to board the idling trucks for their daily deployment. The federal ICE agents are nowhere to be seen. It’s 9 a.m. Sunday morning. They may have already hit the streets.

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