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Migration



Youth from the Shrine of the Sacred Heart gather at the entrance of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington after a procession to observe the World Day of Migrants and Refugees Sept. 28, 2025. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Cardinal Robert McElroy wasted no time pointing out that this year's World Day for Migrants and Refugees is not like the others — at least not in the U.S.

"For this year we are confronting — both as a nation and as a church — an unprecedented assault upon millions of immigrant men and women and families in our midst," McElroy said during a Sept. 28 homily at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, as the archdiocese in the nation's capital observed the church event that celebrates, on Oct. 4-5 this year, the resilience of displaced people around the world.

Though McElroy has been steadily defending migrants, the archbishop of Washington on Sunday focused on the government's actions that kept many in his flock from attending the event, following reports of catechists and ministers detained on their way to Sunday Mass and other church activities.

No one argues that removing those convicted of serious crimes is a legitimate national goal, McElroy said, but the way he sees it, what the administration is doing in Washington and the rest of the country has a different goal.

"We are witnessing a comprehensive governmental assault designed to produce fear and terror among millions of men and women," he said. The government's actions make life unbearable for migrants, robbing them of peace "so that in misery, they will 'self-deport,' " he said.



Cardinal Robert McElroy celebrates Mass Sept. 28, 2025, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington during a Mass for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which the church observes Oct. 4-5 this year. In his homily, McElroy, archbishop of Washington, singled out what he called the government's assaults against migrants and thanked church members and others who have come to their aid. (GSR/Rhina Guidos)

The Trump administration has said it aims to deport 1 million in the first year of its second term, though some, including The Wall Street Journal, have cast doubt on data that would make that a reality. Even so, reports about detained or deported churchgoers, and viral videos, such as one circulated Sept. 26 showing a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent pushing a woman and shoving her to the ground in a New York immigration court building, have been sowing mass fear among immigrants with and without permission to be in the country. The New York Times reported Sept. 29 that even U.S. citizens have been detained or arrested by immigration officials.

During a procession — from Washington's predominantly immigrant Shrine of the Sacred Heart to Mass at the cathedral that hosts Masses for government officials and workers — women religious and priests shared anecdotes about massive drops in church attendance, parishioners detained and others afraid of leaving their homes. They also expressed outrage at some of the tactics employed by the government.

Holy Cross Sr. Ruth Nickerson said she took part in the procession to "support the migrants and refugees, especially those who are being disappeared in our own city here in D.C." as she walked with other Catholics along a main street in the District of Columbia, where countless immigration-related arrests have taken place shortly after President Donald Trump declared a public safety emergency in August.



Holy Cross Srs. Ruth Nickerson, right, and Brenda Cousins, walk down a main street in Washington Sept. 28, 2025 during a procession of about 1,000 to mark the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. The women religious say they participated to show support and because of concerns about how migrants have been treated during the Trump administration's immigration crackdown this year. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"We're hoping that the prayer and coming together will help people to understand that this is really about human rights for everyone, not just for them," Nickerson said.

In El Paso, Texas, Scalabrinian Sr. Leticia Gutiérrez Valderrama told Global Sisters Report Aug. 28 that the current immigration crackdown is just the latest assault for victims of an unjust system that tells people who have contributed to the economic development of this country: "You don't matter. I will criminalize you, and not only that, I will expel you, shut the door on you."

On this World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Gutiérrez, who accompanies women, children and men in immigration court at the border diocese, said she wants to invite Catholics and others not to look at immigration as a political issue but as one focused on protecting life.

"Just as we talk about caring for life from the moment of conception, we have the same responsibility to care for it until it stops existing among us. That means caring for life in all its dimensions, in all circumstances," she said. "The life of a little one in the womb of a mother is as valid as the life of a person who migrates, who had to leave his or her country and couldn't stay there for whatever reason.

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"It would be worth reviewing that teaching of defending life or examining why we only decide to defend life in the womb. And let's contemplate it looking at the person who is migrating and how policies tear others apart, including mothers from their children."

El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, told GSR Sept. 8 that he shares a great concern for those deported but also those who stay behind and he worries how they will survive if the breadwinner is taken away.

"But there's another level that preoccupies me just as much, and that is what this might mean for our nation," he said. "What has happened to this place that at one time was proud of its heritage as a nation uniquely made, built by the labors of immigrants?"



Sr. Joanna Okereke, of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, prays during Mass Sept. 28, 2025, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. Okereke, assistant director of Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees and Travelers with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, attended the Mass celebrating the resilience of migrants for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which the church observes Oct. 4-5 this year. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Back in Washington, McElroy contemplated similar worries during the Mass, particularly because actions that are inciting fear come directly from the government.

"Our government is engaged in — by its own admission and by the tumultuous enforcement actions it has launched — a comprehensive campaign to uproot millions of families and hard-working men and women who have come to our country seeking a better life that includes contributing to building up the best

elements of our culture and society," he said. "This campaign relies on fear and terror at its core, for the government knows that it cannot succeed in its efforts except by bringing new dimensions of fear and terror to our nation's history and life."

About 1,000 attended the procession, organized by the archdiocese and Jesuit Refugee Service. Hundreds of others waited at the packed cathedral, where they twice gave McElroy a standing ovation, continuously clapping for him as he left.

He asked the crowd to pray for those who'd had too much fear to be among them, to walk the streets freely as they once had done, and no longer feel safe or at peace.



An estimated 1,000 Catholics and others supporting migrants gather outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington after a procession to observe the World Day of Migrants and Refugees Sept. 28, 2025. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"Are they our neighbors?" he asked, linking them to the Gospel read at the Mass. The reading focused on the parable of the good Samaritan, who, despite his lowly status, stopped to help a man who had been robbed and left beaten on the side of the road, even as others of a higher social rung passed by. McElroy made comparisons with migrants in the U.S. who, despite their status, care for the sick and elderly, serve the church, lead the daily rosary and raise children who serve the country.

"In the Gospel today, Jesus demands that the central perspective we must bring to understanding the moral legitimacy of the campaign of fear and deportation being waged in our country today springs from the bonds of community that have come to tie us together as neighbors, not the question of whether sometime in their past individuals broke a law by entering or remaining in the United States," he said.

"But Jesus rejected this indifference, this fear, this reluctance. His telling last words in the Gospel allow only one option. Which of these in your opinion was neighbor to the robber's victim? In understanding and facing the oppression of undocumented men and women in our midst, we can only have one response: I was, Lord, because I saw in them your face."