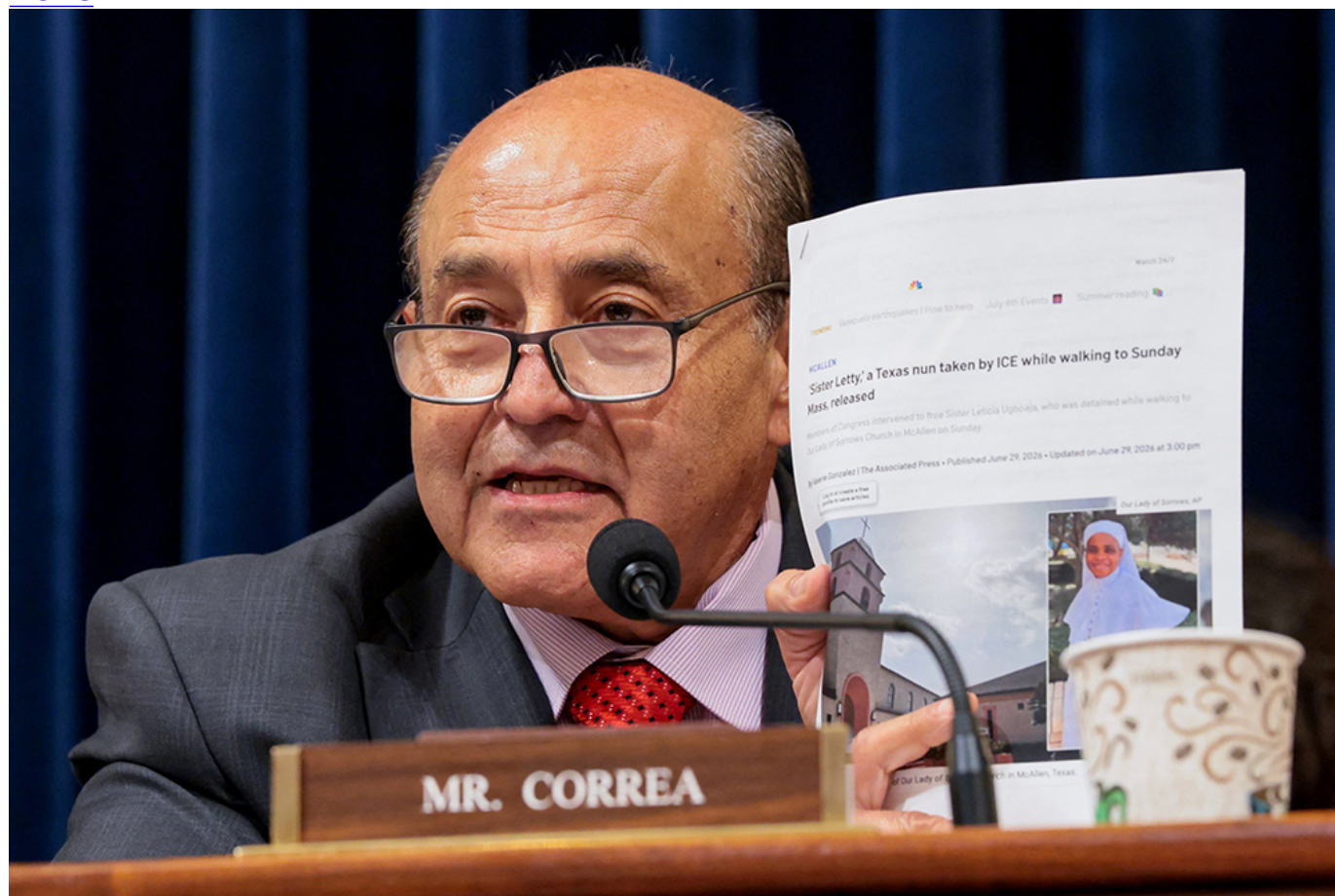




At a hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington June 30, 2026, Rep. Lou Correa, D-Calif. holds up a news article about Sr. Leticia Ugboaja, a member of the Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy. (OSV News/Reuters/Kylie Cooper)

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A Texas bishop said he is "grateful to God" that a foreign-born religious sister, detained by immigration authorities in late June, can remain in the U.S. as her case is processed.

But, he warned, the outcome of the proceedings — which include the risk of third-country deportation — "remains an open question," with others facing a similar plight.

Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, issued a July 29 statement expressing "some relief" that Sr. Leticia Ugbaaja (also known as "Sister Letty") would be permitted to "remain in our community while her case is allowed to move forward."

Ugbaaja — a member of the Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy, a congregation founded in Nigeria, and a registered nurse — has served in the McAllen, Texas, area for more than a decade, providing pastoral support and working in local healthcare.

She was detained en route to Mass June 28 by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and held for several hours, until several congressional representatives intervened to secure her release.

During a July 23 press conference, Ugbaaja recalled feeling "very much afraid, with cold sweat" during the apprehension, saying her heart was "very tachycardic" during the encounter.

Her voice filled with emotion as she described being denied by ICE agents the opportunity to attend Mass.

Her attorney, Carlos Moctezuma García, explained during the same press conference that a judge had denied Sister Leticia's petition for asylum in 2019, while still granting her "protection from removal to Nigeria" under the United Nations' convention against torture.

The judge had found Ugbaaja "had met the high legal standard required to show it was more likely than not that she would face torture if returned" to Nigeria, said

García.

Over the past several years, the African nation has seen ongoing violence against both Christians and Muslims by Islamic extremists. Kidnappings of Catholic women religious were documented in 2017 and 2018, ahead of Ugbaoja's asylum denial.

Although the judge's removal protection "legally bars" the U.S. from deporting her to Nigeria, García said, Ugbaoja "remains as a technical matter under a final order of removal."

She holds "a valid employment authorization document" while attending all required appointments with immigration officials, he said.

Her June 28 detention was part of an attempt to remove Ugbaoja "not to Nigeria but to a third country," a move that marks both "a separate legal pathway from the one her protection forecloses," and "the subject of active litigation in federal courts nationwide," García said.

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In his statement, Flores urged prayer and accompaniment for "the many individuals and families who live in fear and anxiety as they seek a way to resolve their immigration status.

"The prospect of deportation to a third country frightens many persons who, like Sister Letty, have violated no laws, and who have been granted permission to stay while conditions in their country of origin remain life-threatening," said Flores.

He added, "Sister Letty's case reminds us that a right to seek recourse, and respect for the rules of due process are a vital part of our legal system, designed to protect the vulnerable who often have no voice."

Flores stressed that "the Catholic bishops have long called for, and continue to advocate for humane reform of the immigration system, one that respects the distinction between criminals and asylum seekers who are fleeing criminals."

"We can be a nation of both respect for law and of well-considered compassion for persons at risk in their own countries," said Flores.

He underscored that "a consensus must be found in our country that defends the common good, protects the vulnerable, and treats all persons whose immigration status is being reviewed with humanity," adding, "May God guide us in building a society reflecting both justice and mercy."