

# THE OKLAHOMAN

## RELIGION

# 'It splits my soul.' Immigrants, archbishop discuss immigration crackdown

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An Oklahoma faith leader has asked the Trump administration to allow clergy inside immigration detention centers to offer pastoral care for detainees.

Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul S. Coakley, who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told a group of local parishioners that the request was among the issues he discussed during a high-profile meeting with President Donald Trump in January. At a recent gathering at Little Flower Catholic Church, Coakley shared several details about the meeting, which included Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem.

Before the Feb. 20 private listening session at the south Oklahoma City church, Coakley had not publicly shared specific details about what he and Trump and members of Trump's administration discussed at their meeting.

Voices Organized In Civic Engagement, known as VOICE-OKC, hosted the gathering at Little Flower to give immigrant parishioners an opportunity to speak directly to Coakley and to hear from him as their archbishop and the president of an influential coalition of American bishops based in Washington, D.C. The Rev. Tim Luschen, pastor of Little Flower, is one of VOICE-OKC's founding members.

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An estimated crowd of 200 listened to three immigrants from mixed-status households — families that include both documented and undocumented members

— tell how the federal government's immigration enforcement crackdown has affected them and their families and altered life in their local neighborhoods.

Emilee Bounds, VOICE-OKC lead organizer, said only 11 translation headsets were checked out because the vast majority of the crowd were Spanish speakers. The speakers' names have been withheld because they had been told their personal information would not be disclosed because of fears they would be targeted.

Poignant testimonies were shared, including that of a grandmother who described the moment her 7-year-old grandson begged her not to step out of their car at a fuel station.

*"No quiero que te lleven — I don't want them to take you,"* she recalled him saying.

The woman said her grandson's words saddened her.

"It splits my soul to live what is happening under this presidency," she said. "How can a boy live with this anguish in silence? A boy should only study, play and be happy and not live in this fear."

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Coakley said he initially asked Noem about pastoral care for detainees and also asked her to appoint an individual who could serve as a liaison between Homeland Security and those offering pastoral care.

The clergy leader said he also told Trump and his administration about a crisis that has arisen regarding the R-1 visa and EB-4 visa process for foreign-born clergy. Numerous foreign-born clergy members are having to abandon their flocks because of a 2023 U.S. State Department reinterpretation of how green card applications should be handled for foreign-born religious workers, according to USA Today. Previously, foreign-born clergy could work in the United States for up to five years on an R-1 visa, and apply for an EB-4 visa toward the end of that period that would

give them permanent residency and place them on a path toward citizenship, the news outlet reported.

Coakley said he was on his way out of Washington, D.C., when he got word from the White House that this dilemma was being addressed.

Prior to discussing his meeting with Trump, the archbishop thanked those who shared their stories and thanked the church and VOICE-OKC for inviting him.

He shared the spiritual teachings found within a special pastoral message on immigration that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved during the same November 2025 fall plenary assembly where he was elected the group's president. In their missive, the bishops expressed their concerns about the contemporary debate and vilification of immigrants, detention center conditions, detainees' lack of access to pastoral care and the reality that some immigrants "had arbitrarily lost their legal status."

"We want you to know that we as your shepherds, we as your bishops, we as your pastors, now what you are suffering," Coakley told the crowd. "We hear your voices."

According to the Catholic bishops' organization, it marked the first time in 12 years the bishops invoked this "particularly urgent way of speaking as a body of bishops." The last one, issued in 2013, was in response to the federal government's contraceptive mandate.

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## **Call to fix 'broken' immigration system**

Coakley told the Oklahoma City crowd that the bishops recognize that the U.S. has the right to protect its borders, as every nation has the same right.

He said for the bishops, advocacy for meaningful immigration reform remains one of their "highest priorities" as they recognize that the U.S. immigration system is

"broken, it is not working and it must be fixed."

The bishops, Coakley said, think the time has come to fix the nation's immigration system.

"One of the points that has been made to President Trump and to many government officials is that the borders of the United States have never been more secure than they are right now," he said. "So, now is the time — and there are no excuse to delay in enacting meaningful immigration reform."

Coakley said he wanted to assure attendees that ways to resolve the current situation were being considered.

"The president indicated that he recognized the need for a significant overhaul of our immigration system," he said.

"These are the things that are happening. It may not be obvious or apparent that anything is happening, but I want you to be assured that people are working to remedy and to fix this terrible problem, this terrible human tragedy that is causing so much suffering."

The religious leader said he received a "sign of hope" in the form of a phone call as he was about to board a plane leaving Washington. He said during his meeting with Trump, the president had said that he didn't see why clergy should find it so difficult to gain access to this country if they come here to serve American people.

"I received a phone call that the president had changed the rule that now permits a more generous distribution of our religious worker visas that will enable at least religious workers who are serving our parishes and communities around the country to have smoother and easier access to their ministry here in this country."

In mid-January, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued an interim final rule to religious organizations and their communities allowing thousands of religious workers — including priests, nuns, and rabbis — that previously were

required to remain outside the United States before returning, to resume their essential services, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services news release. "This rule significantly reduces this wait time, providing stability and minimizing disruptions for faith-based communities," the release said.

Coakley said he was pleased with this turn of events.

"That is a small step, but a significant one, and I hope that it's an indication that it is possible to continue to work with this administration and to create dialogue with them and work together for the meaningful reform of the immigration system that we all recognize is desperately needed," Coakley said.

## **Stories of fear, mental trauma**

A woman who served as one of the emcees for the evening praised the trio of immigrants for their bravery in sharing their stories.

In addition to the grandmother who spoke of her grandson's fears about Immigration and Customs Enforcement efforts, another woman told the archbishop she and her husband came to the United States in 2022 and lived in Colorado for a time before moving to Oklahoma, where they had friends and the cost of living was less expensive. She said her husband was picked up by ICE in June when he stopped to give some of his coworkers a ride to work.

The woman said her husband had been sent to several detention camps, including one in the Tulsa area and one at Cimarron Correctional Facility. She said he is currently being detained on the West Coast.

"They chain him on his hands and feet like he is an animal," the woman said. "He has had only one traffic ticket."

Her husband's detainment has affected the entire family. She said her older daughter is trying to help pay the bills now that her father has been detained and her son, who is on the autism spectrum, continuously asks where his father is. The

woman said her younger daughter is being taunted by other students because her "father is in prison."

"I feel sorry for all the families going through the same thing," she said.

A man who spoke said he arrived in the U.S. and "went looking for something called the American Dream." He got married and began a career as a musician. He said he was detained in 2025 by ICE when he was riding as a passenger in a car headed to Texas, where he expected to perform. The man said he was detained at a Texas detention facility where he felt isolated and wondered how his family was doing without him.

"I was unsure how to silence the fear about what was happening to my family," he said.

With the help of an attorney his family retained, he was able to bond out and return home, where he is currently required to wear an electronic monitoring device. He said he's grateful for his wife and children who "didn't stop fighting for me."

"This bracelet causes me a lot of pain and it fills me with fear," he said. "The mental trauma has hurt me in the profound part of my soul. Just mowing the lawn, I wonder is this the day, is this when they come for me?"

VOICE-OKC is a grassroots coalition of congregations, nonprofits, worker associations and schools that have come together to ensure that the voices of Oklahoma City metro area families are heard regarding issues and concerns. Bounds said the organization is a part of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

"One of our primary concerns is the development of leaders in our (member) institutions, creating a space of them to have agency around what is happening to them, and for them to hear from the archbishop about what the Church is saying about this issue," Bounds said about the gathering's premise. "The Church is doing good work and really putting their values around this issue."

Luschen, Little Flower pastor and one of the VOICE-OKC founders, said he was pleased that his church was able to offer immigrants a safe space to share their personal stories.

"To be able to tell their stories in their church — their joys, their sorrows — that is what a church community should be about," he said. "If we can't do that, we have to ask what kind of church are we."