



Following a prayer service for migrants in San Diego, California, participants march from the city's Catholic cathedral to the Federal Building. (Chris Stone)



by Ken Stone

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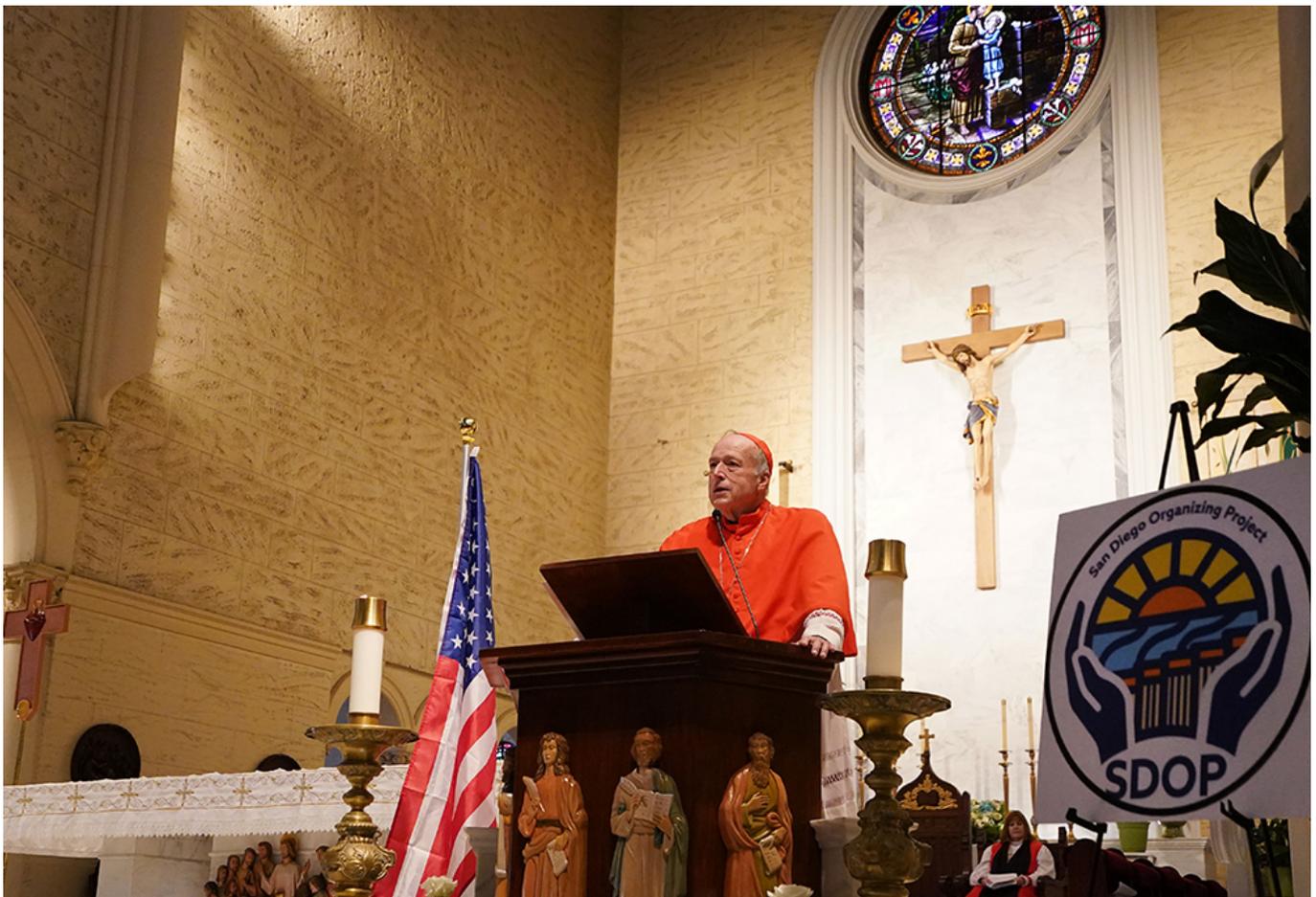
San Diego — February 10, 2025

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Cardinal Robert McElroy decried the White House crackdown on undocumented immigrants as a "war of fear and terror," speaking at a prayer service on Sunday just days after federal cuts forced the U.S. bishops' conference to lay off 50 employees in its migrant resettlement office.

Only weeks away from beginning his papal assignment in Washington, D.C., McElroy used some of the strongest language to date from a U.S. prelate to decry Trump administration moves on immigration.

"We can do nothing other than come together and pray and proclaim our belief that the rights of every man and woman and child and family are in violence in our midst," McElroy said at an overflow crowd of 1,200 at a prayer service at St. Joseph Cathedral\* in downtown San Diego on Feb. 9.



San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy speaks during a prayer service for immigrants at St. Joseph Cathedral in San Diego on Feb. 9. (NCR photo/Chris Stone)

"We must speak up and proclaim that this unfolding misery and suffering and, yes, war of fear and terror cannot be tolerated in our midst," McElroy said. "We must speak up and say: 'Go no farther' because the safety ... humanity of our brothers and sisters, who are being targeted, are too precious in our eyes and in God's eyes."

The prayer service marks one of the cardinal's last major public appearances in San Diego before he moves across the continent to take charge of the Archdiocese of Washington. The comments also come as the U.S. Catholic church is reeling from major cuts to Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Relief Services.

**[Related: Vatican charity head blasts Trump's USAID cuts as 'reckless' decision that will 'kill millions'](#)**

The 50 bishops' conference workers dismissed amount to about one-third of the Migration and Refugee Services Office. Workers were notified of layoffs in a memo on Friday, along with news that the U.S. government has failed to reimburse the office \$20 million for services rendered last year, a memo obtained by OSV News said. The memo was first reported by The Pillar.

The layoffs come on the heels of news that Catholic Relief Services has been forced to begin shutting down programs funded by U.S. Agency for International Development, which supplies about half of the Catholic organization's \$1.5 billion budget, said CRS president and CEO [Sean Callahan in a staffwide email sent Feb. 3.](#)

The San Diego Diocese spiritual leader since 2015, who turned 71 four days earlier, referred to cutbacks on immigration programs. "This is the antithesis of being Christian," he said. "They're losing the funding of Catholic Charities."

In a brief interview with National Catholic Reporter before the service, McElroy condemned the idea of what he called the "massive and indiscriminate deportation" of immigrants, "many of whom have been in this country for decades."

McElroy said that the "indiscriminate nature" of ICE raids aims to create fear so that people don't go to church, school "and feel terrorized in their lives — so that they will, as the some say, self-deport."



San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy speaks to reporters prior to a prayer service for immigrants at St. Joseph Cathedral, Feb. 9 in San Diego. (NCR photo/Chris Stone)

At the hourlong prayer service, McElroy echoed other speakers citing the American ethos that "we are a nation of immigrants."

"God created all of us in dignity," he said. "We are all children of our God. And when misery and fear and terror are unleashed upon the land, we cannot stand silent."

McElroy, who will be installed as the eighth archbishop of Washington on March 11, didn't take part in a 20-minute march from the cathedral — first built in 1875 and rebuilt after a 1937 fire — to downtown federal buildings.

In his remarks at the cathedral, accompanied by Spanish-speaking Auxiliary Bishop Ramon Bejarano and Episcopal Bishop Susan Brown Snook, McElroy acknowledged that Catholic teaching allows for the right of nations to secure borders.

"But what we are witnessing is far different than that," he said. "It is not a targeted effort to secure the border. It has become an indiscriminate campaign to bring fear into the hearts of every undocumented person, man, woman, mother child, family in our society."

But Vino Pajanor, an Indian immigrant who now serves as chief executive officer of Catholic Charities in San Diego and Imperial counties, shared concrete efforts to protect immigrants.

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He distributed business cards — English on one side, Spanish on the reverse — titled "Know Your Rights / Get informed and be prepared," with a QR code to the website [emergencysafetyplan.org](http://emergencysafetyplan.org) with advice in a variety of languages.

"Play the 'I Know My Rights' audio if you wish to assert your rights during any interaction with law enforcement or Border Patrol agents," the site says. "It asserts your constitutional rights and shows you are aware of your legal protections in such situations."

Before speaking at the hastily organized service, with help from the immigrant rights group San Diego Organizing Project, Pajanor told how his charity was helping resettle refugees.

Catholic Charities in recent years has resettled 125,000 refugees annually, including 300 in San Diego — taken in by their "affinity groups," he said.

"We see Jesus in each one of them," Pajanor said.



Participants gather outside St. Joseph Cathedral in San Diego on Feb. 9, after a prayer service for immigrants. They were getting ready to take part in a multi-faith procession to the Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building in San Diego where they held a prayer vigil. (NCR photo/Chris Stone)

At the cathedral, several speakers gave testimony on how recent events have affected them. Two adult sisters, side-by-side, spoke in English and Spanish, telling the fears of their families. One was near tears.

At a half-hour rally and prayer vigil overseen by several dozen San Diego police officers, others gave fiery speeches in Spanish.

Before the event, participants were urged on social media not to bring other nations' flags — a common motif of immigrant rights marches — and instead encouraged to bring religious symbols.

But many small U.S. flags were handed out and waved wildly at several moments, especially amid remarks of Texas-born Bishop Bejarano.

Near the end of the vigil, Bejarano called on parishioners from all over the county to raise their hands in prayer — aimed at empty federal buildings across the street on Super Bowl Sunday.

Cardinal McElroy told NCR: "We're helping with speaking out; we're helping with prayer, and I think we'll have to be advocates — all of us — for the rights of these families and children, men and women."

In concluding his 5-minute cathedral talk, he said, "So as we go forth ... let us remember that ... we ask God's blessing upon us all but at every moment of the unfolding weeks. We cannot stay silent but speak up for the rights of those who are undocumented and for the wrong of unleashing the campaign of fear, which is unfolding in our midst."

*\*This story has been updated to correct references to St. Joseph Cathedral.*

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)