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Sister Leticia "Letty" Ugboaja speaks during a news conference at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church on Thursday, July 23, 2026, in McAllen, Texas. (AP Photo/Michael Gonzalez)

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A nun who was [taken into immigration custody](#) last month in Texas said Thursday that she went into a cold sweat as two armed men approached her while she walked to Sunday Mass in her habit, thinking about the day's Bible readings and carrying little more than her rosary and cellphone.

"Honestly, in that moment, I did not understand what was going on, what was happening to me," Sister Leticia Ugboaja said at a news conference at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in McAllen, where she spoke out for the first time since U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrested her on June 28.

Ugboaja's attorney says she has for years been granted protection from removal to her native Nigeria because she was likely to face torture there.

Ugboaja, 56, was released several hours after being detained while on her way to church near the U.S.-Mexico border. Parish officials' posting about her on social media brought attention to her case, and Congress members ultimately intervened on her behalf. President Donald Trump made mass deportations a central promise of his second administration, with his immigration crackdown leading to unusually aggressive tactics that have faced scrutiny.

Ugboaja, who has a check-in appointment with ICE on Tuesday, said she wanted to speak out to help others, and pleaded for people to have the chance to be heard before being taken into custody.

"There are many others in this same situation, people who have been given some form of protection under our laws, who have followed every rule asked of them, and who still live with uncertainty," Ugboaja said.



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While she's grateful to those who helped her, she said, that "does not mean I can stay quiet about what happened to me, or about what is still happening to others."

Her attorney, Carlos M. Garcia, sat next to Ugboaja at the news conference and provided details about her immigration case. He said that in 2019 an immigration judge denied her application for asylum but granted her protection from removal to Nigeria because she likely would be tortured there. Garcia said Ugboaja, who is a nurse, has complied with everything required of her and had permission to work in the U.S.

When ICE detained Ugboaja in June, she wasn't given much explanation as to why she was taken into custody, her attorney said. But the U.S. planned to remove her to a third country, he added.

The Trump administration's third-country removal policy has been criticized by lawyers and human rights groups and has faced legal challenges. The Department of Homeland Security has said the agreements allow people seeking asylum in the U.S. to pursue protection in the other country, and that the agreements are used to try to address large backlogs in immigration courts.

DHS and ICE did not respond to a request to comment on Ugboaja's case on Thursday and did not respond to requests for comment after her detention in June.

Ugboaja is part of the Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy and volunteered as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion at Our Lady of Sorrows Church, a spokesperson for the Diocese of Brownsville has said. Ugboaja is also a registered nurse at South Texas Health System and worked previously for 10 years as a certified nursing assistant in Edinburg, the spokesperson said.

Ugboaja said that on the day she was taken into custody, she begged the officers to let her attend Mass and receive Holy Communion, but was told she could not.

"For me, a nun, not to go to Mass on Sunday, not to receive Communion, it was very, very heartbreaking for me," she said.

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