

OPINION / COMMENTARY / GUEST ESSAYS

Episcopal bishop: All immigrants deserve access to church without fear

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Clergy members from churches sing at a Long Island interfaith rally against ICE mass deportations in Huntington Station on July 8. Credit: Morgan Campbell

By Lawrence C. Provenzano

Guest essay

August 26, 2025 6:00 am

As the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, for decades I have preached and lived this divine call: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love thy neighbor, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being — these values are central to our Christian faith.

Right now, immigrants in Nassau County aren't going to church. They're afraid to bring their children to Sunday School and to attend weekly Mass. They're not showing up for English classes or their bilingual AA and other recovery programs. They're not even coming to our food pantries, which provide life-sustaining nourishment for so many families in the community.

These people — some of whom are citizens or green card holders — aren't staying home because they don't want or need the Church's services — they're isolating themselves out of fear that Nassau County police officers, working under a special agreement with the Department of Homeland Security, will target, arrest, and separate them from their loved ones.

I understand why they're fearful. For the past few months, agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement have swarmed workplaces, ripped children from their homes, and detained tens of thousands of New York's immigrants. President Donald Trump also issued an executive order allowing ICE to operate inside places of worship, which for decades had been off limits.

The cruelty we are witnessing is both illegal and immoral, and it separates us from the love of God and from one another. That's why the diocese has joined in challenging a recent agreement signed between ICE and the Nassau County Police Department. This so-called 287(g) agreement directly opposes our Christian values.

The agreement says county police officers can stop, question, and arrest any resident, anywhere in the county, who they believe may not have adequate documents. It gives our local police the authority to raid immigrant communities and act like federal immigration officers.

I want to be clear: I respect Nassau police officers and the hard work they do. Our diocese has worked side by side with Nassau County officers for years, in particular at the Nassau County Correctional Center, where our clergy provide spiritual and religious support to incarcerated men and women. I myself served for decades as an emergency services chaplain, including in the aftermath of 9/11, and have seen firsthand the sacrifices officers make in times of crisis.

But County Executive Bruce Blakeman's decision to deputize local officers as federal immigration agents won't make our community better or safer. It will only push people further into the shadows, away from God's light.

All people deserve to access the church and to receive care from our ministries without fear of deportation. Right now, the fear in our communities is palpable and widespread, and most certainly goes beyond Nassau County's agreement with the Trump administration that allows county police to work with ICE.

We must do what we can to make sure everyone in our communities can access the services they need while minimizing the terror many feel when they walk outside their doors.

This guest essay reflects the views of the Right Reverend Lawrence C. Provenzano, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.