

FEATURES

U.S. Catholics are facing an authoritarian threat. The church has been here before.

by Maria J. Stephan

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Protesters gather to denounce President Donald Trump's behavior and policies during a "No Kings" rally in Miller Place, N.Y., Oct. 18, 2025. Credit: OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

The Catholic Church in the United States today is facing a crucial test. How will the church lead under what the New York Times columnist Ross Douthat calls an “**imperial presidency**,” marked by daily attacks on human dignity, religious liberty and the republican constitutional order? Will Catholic leadership

accommodate and adapt itself to authoritarian power? Or will it offer leadership to give hope, oppose authoritarian abuses and defend human freedom?

One of the first U.S. bishops appointed by Pope Leo XIV highlights the stakes and possibilities for the church's response to these challenges. Michael Pham came to the United States as a 13-year-old refugee from Vietnam. Bishop Pham has **led interfaith clergy delegations** to bear witness and minister at immigration hearings in San Diego. Their presence has caused masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to **scatter**. Courageous Catholic actions, including pointed denunciations of ICE activities by many bishops and lawsuits challenging federal abuses of power, have intensified over the past several months. Driven less by ideological or policy commitments, and more by a deep love for neighbor, these actions have brought priests, nuns and laity into the streets, courtrooms and picket lines.

If history is a guide, this type of faithful action will be necessary to fight encroaching authoritarianism. Broad-based movements, employing a wide range of geographically dispersed nonviolent tactics like protests, boycotts and strikes, **have historically been the strongest bulwark** against authoritarianism. When large numbers of people from diverse sectors of society come together across divisions, engage in organized defiance and withdraw support from authoritarian regimes—when workers withhold their labor, businesses apply financial pressure, police and military refuse orders to repress protestors, and priests, sisters and lay leaders are in the forefront—they **strip autocrats of their power**.



Clergymen talk with law enforcement officers preventing religious leaders from entering the ICE facility in Broadview, Ill., to offer Communion to immigrants detained inside during an outdoor Mass in Broadview on the outskirts of Chicago Nov. 1, 2025. The Mass was said by Chicago Auxiliary Bishop José María García-Maldonado. Credit: OSV News photo/Leah Millis, Reuters

Catholics are particularly well positioned to lead such a movement. They are one of the largest religious groups in the United States, outnumbering any single Protestant denomination, and they are spread across the country. Today, 20 percent of American adults identify as Catholic, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). And many of them are directly affected by the Trump administration's immigration crackdown and racialized attacks. More than four in 10 U.S. Catholics are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Fifty-eight percent of Hispanic Catholics were born outside the United States. Many Catholics are likely among those now living in fear of masked agents abducting them in unmarked cars to detention centers, where they risk being lost in a chaotic system. Meanwhile, close to three million Black Catholics are experiencing attacks on the Voting Rights Act and the weakening of civil rights protections.

Religious communities must choose whether to enable authoritarianism or play a critical role in defeating it. Researchers from the U.S. Institute of Peace found that religion has played a prominent role in [most major nonviolent campaigns](#) globally from 1945 to 2013 that have challenged authoritarian regimes and military occupations. The sociologist Sharon Nepstad [highlighted](#) the moral authority and mobilizational power of

religious networks, and she found that religious leaders can provide safe spaces for resistance in the face of indiscriminate regime repression, while triggering international pressure on authoritarian regimes.

When the Church Aligned With Authoritarianism

What is the cost when religious leaders accommodate authoritarians, seeking short-term protections rather than demanding freedom for all and a return to democratic order? Powerful segments of the Catholic Church have at times acquiesced to and even supported authoritarian regimes, often driven by a desire for institutional protection, by anti-communist fervor or by ideological alignment. Examples include the Fascist-Vatican alliance in Mussolini's Italy (1929-39), the Falangists of Spain (1936-75) and the Salazar regime in Portugal (1932-68), each of which used church teachings and doctrine to justify its rule. During Argentina's Dirty War (1976-83), sections of the Catholic hierarchy were complicit in the military junta's campaign of terror, marked by thousands of disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings.

In the United States, the Catholic Church's role on issues of democracy and full participation in civic life has also been complicated. In 1925, W. E. B. Du Bois **chided** the church for ordaining almost no Black priests. In the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin used national radio to praise fascism and stoke antisemitism under the "America First" banner. During the mid-20th century many bishops tacitly accepted segregation, and Catholic schools, parishes and hospitals in the South remained segregated into the 1960s. This institutional reticence mirrored broader patterns of white Christian nationalism and its complicity with Jim Crow.

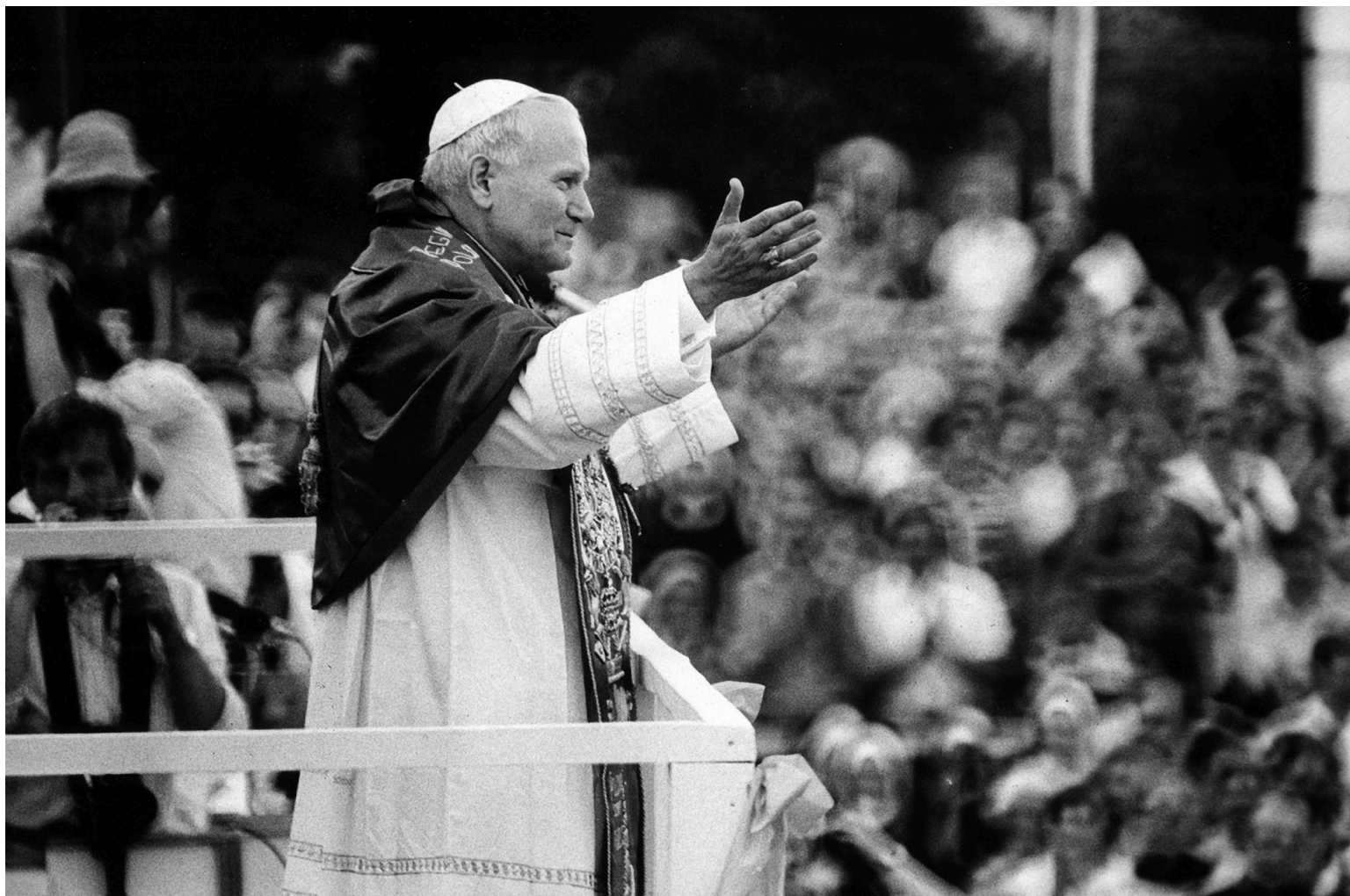
More recently, following a movement away from its focus on issues of war and social justice in the 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops appeared to many Catholics to give tacit support to Donald Trump in 2016. This was exacerbated by the bishops' choice to continue to describe abortion as the "pre-eminent priority" in their statement on voting, "**Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship**," rather than update their language to reflect timely concerns about authoritarianism and immigration. Meanwhile, Catholic leaders' responses to the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol and attempt to overturn the 2020 election were, unfortunately, **mixed**. Some denounced the violence as an attack on democracy, while others remained silent.

Early in Donald J. Trump's second administration, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S.C.C.B., **criticized** executive actions on immigration, the environment and vulnerable populations as "deeply troubling." But as a group the bishops have offered only limited resistance to accelerated assaults on democratic norms. Meanwhile, MAGA insiders, including Vice President JD Vance and the media strategist Steve Bannon, tout their Catholic identities while advancing policies antithetical to Catholic values, including anti-immigrant crackdowns and mass deportations.

When the Church Defended Democratic Freedom

The Catholic Church has been, at times, a fierce opponent of authoritarianism. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the dignity of every human being, a preferential option for the poor and the pursuit of the common good, and it has served as an inspiration for many democracy movements. Pope John Paul II wrote, “The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of elections and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate. She cannot encourage the formation of narrow ruling groups which usurp the power of the State for individual interests or for ideological ends” (“[Centesimus Annus](#),” No. 46).

Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II highlighted solidarity and democratic freedom as key forces necessary to achieve human dignity and the common good. And in 2021, Pope Francis, who grew up under dictatorship in Argentina, [lamented](#) a global “retreat from democracy” and warned against the rise of authoritarianism.



St. John Paul II greets throngs of Poles waiting for a glimpse of their native son at the monastery of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa during his 1979 trip to Poland. Credit: CNS photo/Chris Niedenthal

In the United States, the church has proved that it can champion Catholic social teaching in the face of societal and political pressure. In the U.S. civil rights era, Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans desegregated parochial schools despite virulent opposition from white Catholic parents, lay leaders and politicians. Catholic nuns from orders such as the Sisters of Loretto and the Sisters of St. Joseph **marched in Selma** and Montgomery beside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Lay activists from the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice organized voter registration drives and interracial dialogues. By the mid-1960s, the U.S. bishops proclaimed racial segregation a moral evil. They issued pastoral letters that linked civil rights to Catholic social teaching and urged Catholics to join marches, host educational workshops and support the Voting Rights Act.

Globally, Catholic communities have been on the front lines of freedom movements challenging state authoritarianism.

Poland. Under communist rule in Poland, the Catholic Church became a force for national unity and political opposition. Pope John Paul II's **pilgrimage** in 1979 to his native Poland galvanized national pride and resistance to Soviet domination inside Poland and across the Eastern Bloc. The church in Poland provided spiritual and logistical support to the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement, the first independent trade union in communist Europe. Churches served as meeting spaces, priests acted as intermediaries and message carriers, and religious symbols like the statue of the Black Madonna offered spiritual heft to the mass mobilizations, all of which paved the way to democratic transitions in Poland and across Eastern Europe.

More recently in Poland, following a decade of democratic backsliding under the far-right Law and Justice Party, Catholic leaders joined forces with lawyers and judges, along with youth and women's movements, to press for democratic rule. Many bishops denounced the party's anti-refugee policies and **vocally opposed** its more overtly anti-democratic efforts, including attacks on the independence of the judiciary. The episcopal conference **refused to celebrate Mass** during Poland's Independence Day rallies, citing the party's Islamophobia and "un-Christian nationalism." The Law and Justice Party **was defeated** by a broad-based civic coalition in Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections.



Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin greets former Philippine president Corazon Aquino at a special Mass June 10 coinciding with the launching of a new voters' watchdog group in the Philippines. The group was charged with ensuring clean elections in the 1998 presidential race. Credit: CNS photo from Reuters

Philippines. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church was instrumental in the People Power revolution of 1986 that ended Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship. Cardinal Jaime Sin, using national radio, called on Filipinos across the country to defend human rights. When Marcos attempted to overturn the results of a snap election that he lost, Cardinal Sin called on the people to support defecting military officers, prompting mass mobilization against Marcos, including the powerful business sector. Nuns and priests, who had been trained in nonviolent resistance, stood together with civilians along Manila's EDSA Boulevard, praying, singing and fraternizing with soldiers, which led entire military units to defect from the president to the side of the democratic majority.

El Salvador and Chile. During El Salvador's civil war (1979-92), much of the Catholic hierarchy—especially those committed to serving the poor—stood against the U.S.-backed military dictatorship and its death squads. Archbishop Óscar Romero's slow conversion away from support of the status quo toward a prophetic stance on behalf of his people culminated in his assassination in 1980 while saying Mass. He has become a **global**

symbol of nonviolent resistance after he publicly denounced state violence and called on soldiers to refuse orders to kill civilians. In Chile, under General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973-90), the Catholic Church provided one of the few institutional spaces for dissent. Through the **Vicariate of Solidarity**, the Catholic Church provided shelter, health care, legal aid and employment opportunities for victims of arbitrary detention, torture and forced disappearances. Church-run workshops and cultural programs provided safe venues for clandestine community organizing when political gatherings were banned.

Zambia. In Zambia, the Catholic Church has played a decisive role in advancing democracy. In the 1990s, the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops issued pastoral letters calling for an end to President Kenneth Kaunda's one-party state and urging constitutional reform. When President Frederick Chiluba tried to amend the constitution in 2001 to secure a third term, the bishops' conference joined forces with national Protestant and evangelical church associations, along with the Law Association of Zambia and a coalition of civil society organizations, to **organize nationwide campaigns** against the constitutional changes. This Oasis Forum organized public forums, issued joint pastoral letters and led civic education campaigns warning that Chiluba's moves threatened Zambia's democratic gains. Ultimately, this nonviolent, multifaith mobilization forced Mr. Chiluba to abandon his plan, preserving constitutional term limits.

Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church has played a central role in supporting pro-democracy movements and peaceful resistance to authoritarianism under President Daniel Ortega. During the 2018 anti-government protests, bishops and clergy opened churches as sanctuaries for injured demonstrators and those fleeing police and paramilitary violence, while also **mediating dialogue** between the government and its opposition. Priests publicly denounced human rights abuses from the pulpit, organized prayer vigils and used Masses as occasions to call for justice and nonviolent change. Catholic lay groups helped document repression and provided food, medical care and legal assistance to detainees and their families. Despite harassment and arrests of clergy—including Bishop Rolando Álvarez—the church has continued to act as a moral voice for democracy, human rights and peaceful protest.

Brazil. In Brazil, where the far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, who was raised Catholic but “rebaptized” by an evangelical Protestant pastor and has forged close ties with the evangelical community in the country, oversaw significant democratic backsliding during his term as president from 2019 to 2023, more than 150 Catholic bishops **signed** a “Letter to the People of God” in 2020 denouncing Mr. Bolsonaro's handling of Covid-19 and warning that his government was edging toward totalitarianism. Ahead of the 2022 election, Catholic clergy, evangelical Protestants and more than a dozen religious groups issued a public letter criticizing Mr. Bolsonaro's theocratic messaging and his demonization of minority groups. A broad front helped defeat Mr. Bolsonaro electorally in 2022, and after a Bolsonaro-backed violent mob attacked government buildings and attempted a coup, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops swiftly **condemned** the “criminal attacks on the democratic rule of law.” Mr. Bolsonaro was impeached and sentenced to a 27-year prison term.

South Korea. In South Korea, after then-President Yoon Suk Yeol abruptly declared martial law in December 2024, the Korean Bishops' Conference **condemned the move**, labeling it procedurally illegitimate, and demanded that Mr. Yoon apologize, provide an explanation and face accountability. "The Catholic Church in Korea actively supports and stands in solidarity with the Korean people to protect our democracy," the bishops wrote. Two weeks earlier, 1,466 Catholic priests had released a **statement** accusing Mr. Yoon of neglecting his constitutional responsibilities and polarizing Korean society, and had called for his resignation. Thousands of clergy, religious and lay Catholics demanded Mr. Yoon's impeachment, and he was removed from office in April 2025.

Challenges to MAGA Authoritarianism

Following the 2020 election, during a prolonged campaign by President Trump to undermine election integrity, culminating in the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, Catholics joined thousands of religious and community leaders in signing a **public letter** urging Congress to reject efforts to overturn the election. Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego **called** the assault "the logical trajectory of the last four years of President Trump's leadership."

During the second Trump administration, individual dioceses and Catholic groups have pushed back against its abuses of power. The **Catholic Health Association** and **Jesuit Refugee Service** protested cuts to Medicaid, refugee aid and climate programs, many of which were made unilaterally by the White House, bypassing Congress and the courts. The Catholic Labor Network **denounced** the president's order weakening federal collective bargaining and pressed the courts to block it, while U.S. bishops reiterated support for unions. In May 2025, prominent Christian leaders—including Catholic clergy—united to **condemn** the Trump administration's creation of an "**anti-Christian-bias task force**," calling it a dangerous overreach that threatened religious freedom and democratic principles.



People attend a vigil in support of immigration detainees at the entrance of “Alligator Alcatraz” Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, detention center at the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport in Ochopee, Fla., Aug. 10, 2025. Credit: OSV News/Marco Bello, Reuters

In Los Angeles, Catholic leaders responded to sweeping ICE raids and the National Guard deployment by calling for a Day of Prayer for Peace and Unity on June 11. Archbishop José H. Gomez urged parishes to hold special Masses and adoration to support frightened communities. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, in partnership with local businesses, launched the **Family Assistance Program** to deliver groceries, medicine, essential supplies and financial relief to families affected by immigration enforcement.

The San Diego diocese launched Faithful Accompaniment In Trust & Hope, an **interfaith ministry** placing clergy and lay volunteers at immigration court, organizing escorts for people leaving hearings, and offering pastoral presence and accompaniment. Catholic groups have organized de-escalation trainings and **virtual webinars** on nonviolent resistance and noncooperation. They have initiated public solidarity actions, like the **procession** that Bishop Mark Seitz led, together with the Hope Border Institute, in the **streets of El Paso**.

Parishes have also joined interfaith lawsuits to restore guidelines that protect houses of worship from ICE raids. Catholic dioceses like San Bernardino have even issued **religious dispensations**, relieving parishioners

of their Sunday obligation due to fear of deportation, and have refused to permit enforcement actions on church premises. A grassroots coalition spearheaded by the Jesuits West Province—in partnership with other orders of religious men and women, other Catholic advocacy groups, and the U.S.C.C.B.—has organized **One Church, One Family**, a nationwide initiative that includes vigils outside of immigration offices and detention centers, prayer services at the sites of immigration arrests and rosaries prayed at court hearings.

The Catholic Leadership We Need Now

U.S. Catholics have a crucial role to play in upholding fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms that are core to the Catholic faith. There are many ways to bear witness, disrupt injustices and unite around an affirmative vision of what we demand for our democracy. Catholic action is most inspired when it resists injustice and evil without dehumanizing, when it is guided by the redemptive love of Jesus, and when it emphasizes hope and courage over fear and despair.

So what can Catholics do? Bishops, priests, religious and laypeople all have a role to play in challenging authoritarianism through the power of nonviolence and nonviolent action. Here are some action points to remember.

- Catholics can speak truth to power. Bishops can use sermons, pastoral letters, op-eds and media engagement to reaffirm democratic principles rooted in Catholic social teaching, and to denounce authoritarian abuses of power and the harmful religious ideologies underpinning them. They can encourage diocesan leaders, heads of Catholic academic institutions and local priests to preach on Catholic social teaching and the importance of democratic principles to the common good.
- Catholic media outlets and social media influencers could amplify powerful pastoral letters like **that** of Bishop Mark E. Brennan of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W. Va., who wrote, “It is Catholic teaching that an unjust law does not bind in conscience” and invokes the possibility of noncooperation with unjust laws. They can promote **critical discourses** on the harmful effects of white supremacy on U.S. Christianity.
- Catholics can couple moral protest with an affirmative vision of a democratic society grounded in respect for human dignity and the common good, like **that** offered by Robert McElroy, then bishop of San Diego, when he wrote, “We must dedicate ourselves to completely transforming our political and cultural life so as

to emphasize unity over division, dialogue over confrontation and character over political and personal gain.”

- We can revive study of Vatican II documents on the characteristics of a vibrant political community, “especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good...” (“Gaudium et Spes,” No. 73).
- Catholic leaders can emphasize that the struggle in the United States is not between red and blue, or Republican and Democratic. Rather, it is between what Pope John Paul II called the “**arrogance of power**” and the forces of human freedom and a belief in the *imago Dei* (the image of God in all God’s creation).
- All Catholics can bring expressions of Catholic faith into pro-democracy protests and public witnesses, immigration hearings and detention centers with hymns, prayer, and public devotions like praying the rosary. They can offer pastoral care, mitigate fear and normalize noncompliance with harmful practices. The “**Jericho walks**” around 26 Federal Plaza in New York City (the site of immigration hearings), and **weekly prayer vigils** and protests outside Alligator Alcatraz in the Everglades are good examples of ritualized faithful action. In Illinois, there have been Eucharistic processions to the ICE detention facility in Broadview and “**holy nuisance**” actions in Chicago to slow or impede ICE arrests. Bringing the **power of music** into faithful gatherings, protests, vigils and demonstrations can help break fear and unite people in shared purpose.
- Catholic schools can offer education and training. Catholic universities, schools, parishes and civic groups can educate the public about the dangers of our current political environment and offer strategies and tactics for defeating authoritarianism, drawing on the rich tradition of Catholic nonviolent resistance. Some examples already happening include webinars, teach-ins, pray-ins and workshops, such as those hosted by the **Franciscan Action Network**, **Campaign Nonviolence**/Pace e Bene, **One Million Rising**, the **Freedom Trainers** and **Harnessing Our Power to End Political Violence**. They are all focused on nonviolent resistance and making political violence and repression backfire. The **Faithful Fight** toolkit series offers concrete ways for faith communities to challenge authoritarianism, ranging from bridge-building and survival strategies to noncooperation and civil disobedience. The **Catholic Nonviolence Initiative**, a project of Pax Christi International, offers a wide range of scriptural and practical tools and resources related to nonviolence and nonviolent action, and their role in challenging violence and oppression.
- Catholic parishes can provide sanctuary, aid and violence protection to communities experiencing authoritarian repression. Recent examples include the Family Assistance Program in Los Angeles and brave action by the Hope Border Institute in El Paso. The visible presence of clergy and faith leaders at protests

and demonstrations can help de-escalate tensions and mitigate violence targeting protestors, as well as encourage attendance by a broad constituency. In the report “**A Matter of Survival**,” the Kairos Center calls for using church buildings, transportation networks and financial resources to shelter the vulnerable and describes other creative ways of meeting unmet needs.

- Catholic consumers and business leaders can refuse to cooperate with unjust government action and amplify the call for corporate accountability. This could include communities boycotting corporate enablers of authoritarian practices (like **Avelo airlines**, the main carrier for ICE deportation flights; Home Depot, which has become a staging ground for immigration raids targeting day laborers; and **Amazon**, which has profited from government contracts and surveillance technologies that enable injustices) until they shift their practices. Consumers could also reward companies willing to stick their necks out to defend democratic principles (so-called boycotts). Another tactic is putting up “No ICE” signs in businesses and near schools and places of worship. This strategy could also involve using financial leverage like investment and pension funds to influence government and corporate behaviors, or meeting with sheriffs’ departments to urge noncooperation with ICE. Noncooperation is the **most powerful set of tactics** in nonviolent resistance because it involves directly shifting power away from unjust political and economic systems.
- Catholics can build a united front and support popular movements. There is an urgent need to bring Catholics together across divides to find common ground in the face of cruel and dehumanizing government practices. It is important for the church to collaborate with organizing, social ministry and popular movements in order to live out its call. As **Pope Francis said** at a world meeting of popular movements in 2015: “I am pleased to see the church opening her doors to all of you, embracing you, accompanying you and establishing in each diocese, in every justice and peace commission, a genuine, ongoing and serious cooperation with popular movements. I ask everyone, bishops, priests and laity, as well as the social organizations of the urban and rural peripheries, to deepen this encounter.... As members of popular movements, you carry out your work inspired by fraternal love, which you show in opposing social injustice.”
- Practically, building a **bigger tent** can involve parish and community dialogues, potlucks, supporting efforts like **Nuns on the Bus** and deep work within communities. It involves forging partnerships with key pillars like unions, businesses, veterans’ groups and professional associations, which boast many Catholic members, and undertaking collective action. The Family Assistance Program in Los Angeles involving active partnership with businesses, the Catholic Labor Network’s work with unions, and Catholic public interest law societies’ partnerships with immigration rights groups are good examples of cross-pillar collaboration. Large, cross-sectoral nationwide actions, like **Unite for Veterans** and the **No Kings** demonstrations, offer opportunities to forge connections and build solidarity across divides. Meanwhile,

during a recent meeting between Pope Leo XIV and **Chicago labor leaders in Rome**, the pontiff highlighted the power of unions to embrace the marginalized and encouraged them to continue to advocate for the dignity of the most vulnerable.

- Across national borders, Catholics can build global democratic solidarity by shedding light on how Catholics from across the political and ideological spectrum from around the world have challenged dictatorship. That includes Catholic leaders in Nicaragua, like **Bishop Rolando Álvarez**, who was exiled for supporting nonviolent opposition to the Ortega regime, and Filipino bishops and women religious who were outspoken in their condemnation of ex-president Rodrigo Duterte's **inhumane policies** as part of a "war on drugs," which included thousands of extra-judicial killings. Strengthening learning and relationships across borders is key to building global democratic solidarity in the face of rising global authoritarianism.

These are just a few ways that Catholics can help to reverse the current authoritarian path the United States is on. The leadership of an American-born pope during this critical inflection point for the United States and global democracy could serve as an antidote to the moral corrosion under an "imperial presidency," while offering hope that we can build a society where everyone can flourish. Guided by faith, moral clarity and strategic nonviolent action, Catholics can and must be a vital force for democratic freedom in the United States and around the world.

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