

Why San Diego's Catholic leaders are standing with migrants in court—against impossible odds

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It could be seen as naïve what over 200 residents of San Diego are doing.

On Aug. 11, the Diocese of San Diego, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish and San Diego Organizing Project launched a new ministry called FAITH: Faithful Accompaniment in Trust & Hope. Some 50 people of faith, including the three Catholic bishops of San Diego and members of seven different religious communities and congregations, have signed up to simply stand with people as they go to immigration court to comply with their notices to appear.



Scott Santarosa, S.J., speaks to a group of religious leaders in the lobby of the Edward J Schwartz Federal Building before accompanying migrants in court on International Refugee Day, June 20, 2025. Credit: Courtesy of the Diocese of San Diego.

This pilot program is a follow-up to a very effective gathering of clergy and faith leaders on June 20, World Refugee Day, when we first accompanied migrants to court. The people we feel called to accompany are migrants of mixed variety: Many are new arrivals making a case for asylum, but others have been in the United States for decades, and their cases had been considered administratively closed. Now they are being called to court, and their status in the United States is in jeopardy.

Our purpose is to be present to our immigrant brothers and sisters, and to give witness to the dignity of these people, whose lives hang in the balance. This is perhaps not a new place for most of the people coming to court. They have known how it feels to live at the

low end of the power scale ever since they made their decision to leave their homelands. But to feel powerless is a new experience for many of us in this new ministry.

In truth, when we consider the obstacles we volunteers face as we begin this ministry, our actions feel almost futile. What good do we really think we can do? And when we consider that the size of Goliath will grow, with a budget increase of over \$45 billion to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to build new detention centers and hire some 10,000 additional officers, our task seems all the more formidable. So why do we do this?

We do it because this is what our ancestors in the faith have done since the beginning of time. Against all odds, people of faith have been invited to believe in and work for the impossible. With faith, somehow but not always, the impossible has been transformed into the possible and the real.



Dinora Reyna of the San Diego Organizing Project gives an overview of the court accompaniment program at the chapel of the San Diego Diocese Pastoral Center. Credit: Courtesy of the Diocese of San Diego.

When we began our new ministry a few weeks ago, various stories in Scripture came to mind. In one, Jesus and his disciples are faced with over 5,000 hungry people. When his disciples say, “All we have are five loaves and two fishes,” he says, “Bring them to me.” The disciples trusted Jesus and, somehow, people got fed. In another, Jesus invites Peter to walk on water. Impossible! And yet Peter trusted Jesus; he stepped out of the boat, and behold! He was walking.

We think of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In 1531 the Mother of God appeared to an Indigenous man, in a form similar to him, with dark skin, speaking his native

language. She asked of him the impossible: Go to the bishop and build her a basilica. Impossible! And yet Juan Diego trusted. He presented to the bishop the required proof, eventuating the enshrinement of her image in one of the most visited basilicas in the world.

On the fourth floor of the Edward Schwartz Federal Building in downtown San Diego, where eight immigration courtrooms are found, we often find ICE agents lining the hallways. They are playing their part in the current drama of migrant deportations, waiting for the next person whose case is dismissed so they can arrest them and place them in expedited removal proceedings. We enter and walk through the gauntlet of those agents so we can stand with people: with mothers, with fathers, some younger, some older. In my brief experience, all of them appear fearful or at least nervous, wondering what their fate will be that day.

We can change no outcomes. We enable no results. We are powerless. Why do we do this?

We do this because we trust. We do this because we hope. We do this to all of us—migrants, volunteers, judges, even the ICE agents—of the truth: that regardless of what happens in any courtroom or detention center or deportation, God made us all the good and dignified sons and daughters that we are. We stand with migrants because we believe that. We do this because we feel the Spirit is in this ministry, calling more and more volunteers each week to show up and bear witness with us.

Naïve? Maybe. But it is where and who we are called to be. All people of faith are at some point called to believe in the impossible. Will you trust and hope along with us?



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Michael Pham

Michael Pham has been the bishop of the Diocese of San Diego since July 2025. He was the first U.S. bishop appointed by Pope Leo XIV. Bishop Pham immigrated to the United States from Vietnam and now considers “America’s Finest City” his home.

Dinora Reyna

Dinora Reyna has been the executive director of the San Diego Organizing Project for six years. S.D.O.P. is part of PICO California and Faith in Action, which are faith-based community organizing networks founded by John Baumann, S.J.

Scott Santarosa, S.J.

Scott Santarosa, S.J., has been the pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish since July 2022. Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish has a long history as an immigrant parish, and Jesuits have staffed it since 1940.
