

ANNUAL REPORT

ON THE

State of Religious Liberty in the United States

The Committee for Religious
Liberty of the U.S. Conference
of Catholic Bishops

February 17, 2026



United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops

Annual Report

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes developments in religious liberty at the federal or national level here in the United States in 2025. In the final section, it identifies six areas of critical concern—three challenges and three opportunities—for religious liberty in the coming year, with recommended actions that readers can take in response to each issue.

Legislative activity of the 119th Congress focused on passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which included the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit, a provision that improves parental choice in education but did not include religious liberty protections. Congress introduced other legislation the Committee for Religious Liberty supports, including the Conscience Protection Act, the Equal Campus Access Act, and the FACE Act Repeal Act. The chairman of the Committee for Religious Liberty also wrote to Congress in support of increased funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program.ousands of generations later?

The new administration undertook a number of actions that implicate religious freedom, both positively and negatively. The Trump administration took immediate steps to combat gender ideology, which has corroded religious liberty in recent years. The President directed agencies to repeal regulatory provisions that are unlawful in light of recent decisions of the United States Supreme Court, including *Carson v. Makin*. President Trump also established a Religious Liberty Commission, which include several bishops as members and advisors. The Department of Homeland Security rescinded guidance that required that, absent exigent circumstances, immigration officers needed approval from their Agency’s headquarters before carrying out enforcement activities in or near protected areas, such as hospitals, schools, and churches.

It was an active year for religious liberty before the Supreme Court. The Court issued rulings in cases squarely addressing religious liberty issues, with victories in *Catholic Charities*

Bureau, Inc. v. Wisconsin Labor & Industry Commission and Mahmoud v. Taylor, and a split decision in *Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond*. In *U.S. v. Skrmetti*, the Court declined to hold that people identifying as transgender are a protected class under the Equal Protection Clause—a result that would have had disastrous consequences for religious exercise. The Court will also soon consider taking an important case about the constitutional protection for church autonomy in *O'Connell v. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops*.

The role of religion in American public life was a significant subject of debate in 2025. Catholic services were attacked by media figures and political leaders. The Trump administration took steps to support controversial expressions of Christianity in the public sphere. There was an alarming rise in political violence, as the polarization that has long been the subject of commentary by religious leaders appears to be devolving into a cycle of attack and retribution.

The six areas of critical concern—threats and opportunities—for religious liberty in 2026 are:

- Political and anti-religious violence
- Unjust terms and conditions on federal grants, and unreliability of government
- Access to sacraments for ICE detainees and immigration enforcement at houses of worship
- School choice and the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit
- Repeal of provisions that prevent religious organizations from participating in government programs
- Further repudiation of gender ideology

Foreword

By Archbishop Alexander K. Sample



The following report identifies a number of events that have already shaped and will continue to shape—in both good ways and bad ways—the life of this country for years to come. An act from 2025 that does not appear in the report, but which I believe will prove to be of lasting significance, is the November 11 decision of the U.S. bishops to celebrate the Semiquincentennial of the United States of America by consecrating the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The consecration will take place at the

conclusion of June plenary assembly of the U.S. bishops, which coincides with the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. When we consecrate our nation to the Sacred Heart and enthroned the Sacred Heart in our homes, we recognize the kingship of Christ and offer our own lives in service to God and our neighbors.

This is an opportune time to carry out this consecration. While there were positive developments for religious liberty in the past year, there have been worrying developments as well.

Perhaps most concerning is the ongoing rise in political violence. The polarization the bishops have long lamented seems to be breaking out into serious attacks. Antisemitic sentiment and rhetoric in mainstream institutions appears to be increasing. Furthermore, the administration's aggressive approach to immigration enforcement has led to fears about going to church, driving down Mass attendance and leading some bishops to dispense the faithful from their Sunday obligation. Too much of our national

life is marked by enmity and strife. To be sure, there were positive developments for religious liberty too. In the first year of his second term, President Donald Trump created a Religious Liberty Commission, which several of my brother bishops serve as either members or advisors. The president also issued an executive order that directs federal agencies to repeal rules that prevent religious organizations from fully participating in programs that serve the common good. Congress passed a bill that, while deficient in many respects, included a provision that has the potential to open up one of the largest expansions of school choice we have seen. And the Supreme Court issued rulings that protect parental rights and curtail the spread of gender ideology.

All of these developments are taking place as Americans prepare to celebrate two hundred fifty years as an independent nation. It is a fitting time to reflect on the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and how those ideals have shaped the unique culture that has grown over the past two-and-a-half centuries. For Catholics, it is an opportunity to reflect on how the Church has enriched American life.

As we practice the “pious custom” of consecrating our nation to the Sacred Heart,¹ we do so with the confidence that the Lord will pour out his grace on the United States. And with that confidence, we resolve to do our part in

carrying out the task of “perfecting the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel.”² May this report on the state of religious liberty in the United States aid us in that task.



1 See *Quas primas*, no. 26.

2 *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2.

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Section I:

The Role of the Committee and the Scope of the Report

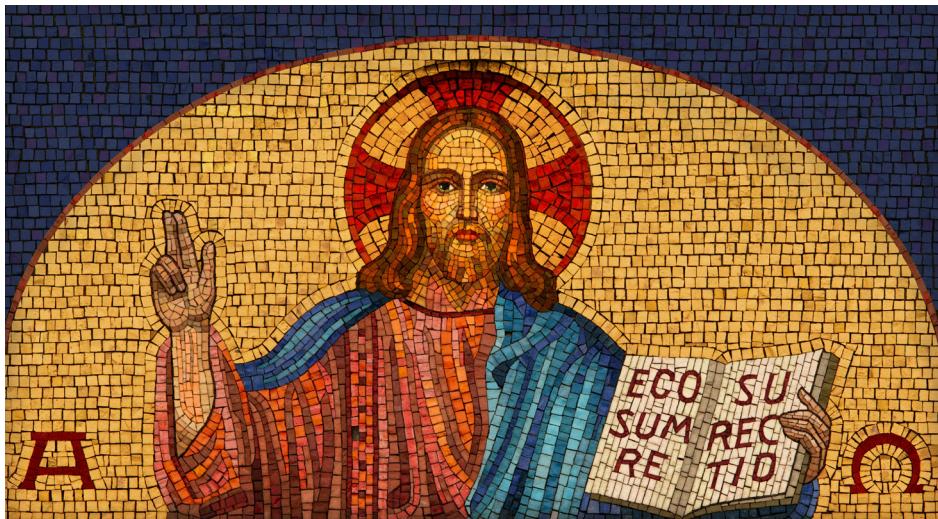
The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is the assembly of the Catholic bishops of the United States, and the vehicle by which they act collaboratively on vital issues confronting the Church and society. The USCCB's Committee for Religious Liberty works to strengthen and sustain religious freedom by assisting the U.S. bishops, individually and collectively, to teach about religious freedom to the faithful and the broader public, and to promote and defend religious freedom in law and policy. Resources outlining numerous aspects of the Committee's work can be found at www.usccb.org/committees/religious-liberty.

The Committee focuses on religious liberty issues that fall within certain parameters, which also define the scope of this report.

First, the Committee works on religious liberty here in the United States. This does not reflect a lack of concern by the bishops for religious liberty abroad—rather, international religious liberty issues fall under

the purview of the Committee on International Justice and Peace. And the state of religious liberty in many other countries is indeed dire. While religious liberty has come under increasing pressure in the United States in recent years, Americans remain blessed by our country's tradition of honoring this God-given right. The work of the Committee for Religious Liberty on domestic issues helps to ensure that the United States continues to be an example for other governments.

Second, the Committee addresses religious liberty issues at the federal or national level. Primarily this consists of federal legislation, actions of the federal executive branch, and decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Committee also addresses matters occurring at the state or local level when they represent national trends or are matters of national importance. State and local religious liberty issues, and religious liberty court cases that have not yet reached the Supreme Court, are generally outside the scope of the Committee's work.



Third, the Committee actively upholds and protects religious liberty for all faiths, but the Committee naturally has a special role, expertise, and interest in protecting the free exercise of Catholicism. So, while this report includes discussion of religious liberty issues affecting other faiths, it is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of all challenges to religious liberty in the United States. Last, when a government infringes on the religious liberty of Catholics, it is typically in furtherance of a worldview or policy priority that is itself contrary to, or to degrees at variance with, Catholic social teaching. But governments also can advance such objectionable policies in ways that do not burden the consciences of individuals or the integrity of religious institutions. Such policies are wrong and harmful to the common good, but they do not pressure people of faith to violate their beliefs.

On matters of this sort, other committees of the Conference take the lead with the consultation and support of the Committee for Religious Liberty as necessary.

Section II:

What is Religious Liberty?

The work of the Committee for Religious Liberty is guided by Catholic social teaching, particularly the Second Vatican Council and the teaching of its declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humanae* (DH).

Religious liberty means immunity from coercion in religious matters. The Church teaches that human persons should not be forced to act contrary to their religious convictions, “whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits” (DH, 2). This right to religious freedom “has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself” (DH, 2).

In Catholic teaching, rights and duties are reciprocal. So, while people have a right not to be coerced on religious issues, this right carries with it the responsibility to seek the truth about God and to live in accordance with that truth.

“The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with

God” (*Gaudium et spes*, 19). The human person—created in the image of God with intellect and free will—naturally desires to know the truth about matters pertaining to religion, such as: *How did everything that exists come to be? What is the Creator like? What happens when I die? How ought I to live in light of the answers to these questions?* Religious freedom protects the space for both individuals and groups to ask these questions honestly. As law professor and religious liberty scholar Richard Garnett puts it, “The appropriately secular and limited state will not prescribe the path this search [for truth and for God] should take, but it will take steps—positive steps—to make sure that ‘freedom for’ religion, and the conditions necessary for the exercise of religious freedom, are nurtured.”

This point about necessary conditions indicates the importance of religious freedom for the common good. One definition of the common good is that it is the set of conditions necessary for a society to flourish. Religious freedom is one of those necessary conditions.



Since human persons naturally desire to know and adhere to religious truth, their flourishing goes hand in hand with religion and religious institutions.

Thus, *Dignitatis humanae* teaches:

Government is also to help create conditions favorable to the fostering of religious life, in order that the people may be truly enabled to exercise their religious rights and to fulfill their religious duties, and also in order that society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men's faithfulness to God and to His holy will (6).

A government that promotes the common good will recognize that religious individuals, communities, and institutions need space to flourish, and such flourishing ultimately

reounds to the benefit of the broader political community. This means that the government does not force its citizens to conform to one particular religion, but neither does it treat religion as a purely private matter or religious institutions as mere voluntary associations. Religious institutions contribute to the good of the political community, and so the civil authority has a rightful interest in policies that help to support the health of religious institutions.

The Committee for Religious Liberty works to protect religious individuals and institutions from coercion in matters of religion and seeks to promote policies that contribute to the flourishing of religious groups.

Section III:

Religious Liberty in Congress

Unlike the 118th Congress, with divided government and little chance for bicameral legislative movement, the 119th Congress and Trump administration form a united Republican government with the potential to pass partisan legislation and enact administrative actions. In 2025, the Congress sought to implement President Trump's domestic agenda. Most of the legislative activity focused on passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which was signed into law on July 4. Upon returning from the August recess, Congress turned to difficult "must-pass" legislation, including the FY2026 appropriations bills and the National Defense Authorization Act, leaving little time for other legislative matters. However, Congress failed to reach a bipartisan agreement on



FY2026 appropriations before the end of the fiscal year, leading to the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, and during which time the House was out of session.

Equal Campus Access Act

The Equal Campus Access Act (H.R.5505/S.2859), led in the House by Rep. Tim Walberg (R-MI-5) and in the Senate by James Lankford (R-OK), prohibits funding made available under the Higher Education Act of 1965 from being provided to any public institution of higher education that denies to religious student organizations any right, benefit, or privilege that is otherwise afforded to other student organizations at the public institution because of the religious beliefs, practices, speech, leadership standards, or standards of conduct of the religious student organization. The Committee supported similar legislation in 2023, and in September joined an interfaith coalition to support the Equal Campus Access Act of 2025.³

Conscience Protection Act

The Conscience Protection Act (H.R.3411/S.1756) led in the House by Rep. August Pfluger (R-TX-11) and in the Senate by Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), would prohibit discrimination against health care entities that do not participate in abortion and would also strengthen federal conscience laws. The CPA is a long-standing USCCB priority and has received consistent support from the Secretariat

on Pro-Life Activities, as well as the Committee for Religious Liberty

The Women's Health Protection Act of 2025

The Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA) (H.R. 12/S.2150) would impose abortion on demand nationwide at any stage of pregnancy through federal statute. Immediately upon passage, the WHPA would invalidate state laws protecting the preborn from abortion, even late in a pregnancy, including laws that prohibit abortion based on race, sex, disability, or other characteristic. It would likely trump state and federal conscience laws that protect the right of health care providers and professionals, employers, and insurers not to perform, assist in, refer for, cover, or pay for abortion.

The WHPA expressly eliminates defenses under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The House passed the WHPA in 2021 and in 2022, but it stalled in the Senate. It was reintroduced in 2025 by Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA-28) and Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI). The USCCB opposed the WHPA in 2022.

Antisemitism Awareness Act of 2025

The Antisemitism Awareness Act (AAA) (H.R.1007/S.558) was introduced in 2023 in response to antisemitic incidents on college campuses, and it was re-introduced in

³ David Nammo, et al, "Letter of Support for the Equal Campus Access Act of 2025," 16 September 2025: www.christianlegalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Group-Letter-supporting-ECAA-Final-09-2025.pdf.

2025. It would direct the Department of Education (USDE) to use the definition of antisemitism put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in the USDE's enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Per IHRA, "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities." The bill would also direct the USDE to adopt IHRA's examples of antisemitism. As of this writing, the USCCB has not taken a position on the AAA.

Federal Scholarship Tax Credit

One of USCCB's priorities during the budget reconciliation process was

to encourage incorporation of the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA), a bill to promote parental choice in education by giving tax credits for donations to scholarship granting organizations.⁴ The USCCB was a prominent advocate for inclusion of religious liberty protections in the ECCA. However, the Senate Parliamentarian ruled that some aspects of ECCA did not comply with the strict rules for budget reconciliation, and the resulting Federal Scholarship Tax Credit that was included in the passed reconciliation bill, which dramatically improves parental choice in education, did not include religious liberty protections.

⁴ USCCB News Release: U.S. Bishops Urge Senate to Act with Courage and Creativity to Protect the Poor and Vulnerable, 26 June 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/us-bishops-urge-senate-act-courage-and-creativity-protect-poor-and-vulnerable. See also "Letter to Congress Regarding Budget Reconciliation," 26 June 2025: www.usccb.org/resources/letter-congress-regarding-budget-reconciliation-june-26-2025.





USCCB staff are working closely with partners in educational choice advocacy to encourage Treasury regulations to be as favorable as possible for religious liberty protections within the program.

FACE Act Repeal Act of 2025

The FACE Act Repeal Act of 2025 (H.R.589/S.223) led in the House by Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX-21) and in the Senate by Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) would repeal the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE). The bishops opposed the FACE Act when it was passed in 1994, concerned it would lead to discriminatory prosecutions against peaceful pro-life protesters. In the thirty years since the passage of the FACE Act, it has been used almost exclusively to protect abortion clinics. In contrast, increased violence against life-saving pregnancy help

centers and churches following the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision went largely unchallenged by the federal government, with only a handful of cases brought under the FACE Act. USCCB's Pro-Life and Religious Liberty Committee chairmen endorsed the legislation in a joint letter.⁵

USCCB staff are working closely with partners in educational choice advocacy to encourage Treasury regulations to be as favorable as possible for religious liberty protections within the program.

⁵ Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades and Bishop Daniel E. Thomas, "Letter of Support for the FACE Act Repeal Act of 2025 (H.R. 589)," 24 July 2025: www.usccb.org/letter-supporting-repeal-face-act.

Religious Workforce Protection Act

Led in the Senate by Tim Kaine (D-VA), Susan Collins (R-ME), and Jim Risch (R-ID), and in the House by Reps. Mike Carey (R-OH-15), Richard Neal (D-MA-01), Maria Elvira Salazar (R-FL-27), and Pete Stauber (R-MN-08), the Religious Workforce Protection Act (RWPA) ([S. 1298/H.R. 2672](#)) would support the free exercise of religion in communities across America by providing limited flexibilities to religious workers who are legally present in the country and waiting to receive their green card. The RWPA has been one of the USCCB's highest advocacy priorities.⁶

Nonprofit Security Grant Program

The Nonprofit Security Grant Program provides grants to nonprofits and houses of worship to enhance security through improvements to infrastructure, funding for emergency planning and training, upgrading security systems, and some renovation projects. Current funding (at \$454.5 million) provides grants to fewer than half the applicants to the program. The USCCB has long supported

this program, and Bishop Rhoades, chairman of the Committee for Religious Liberty, issued a letter requesting that Congress increase funding to at least \$500 million for fiscal year 2026.⁷

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Free Speech Fairness Act

The Free Speech Fairness Act ([H.R. 2501/S.1205](#)), led in the House by Rep. Mark Harris (R-NC-8) and in the Senate by James Lankford (R-OK), would circumvent the Johnson Amendment and allow charitable organizations to make statements relating to political campaigns if such statements are made in the ordinary course of carrying out its tax exempt purpose. The USCCB has not taken

⁶ Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio and Bishop Mark J. Seitz, "Letter to Congress on the Religious Workforce Protection Act," 10 April 2025: www.usccb.org/resources/letter-congress-religious-workforce-protection-act-april-10-2025.

⁷ Bishop Kevin Rhoades, "Letter on Nonprofit Security Grant Program—FY2026," 12 June 2025: www.usccb.org/resources/letter-nonprofit-security-grant-program-fy2026.

a position on this legislation. In a July statement regarding a recent IRS interpretation of the Johnson Amendment, the USCCB Office of Public Affairs said that “the Catholic Church maintains its stance of not endorsing or opposing political candidates.”⁸

Bills Targeting Religious Charities that Serve Immigrants

Senate bill [S.497](#), “Fixing Exemptions for Networks Choosing to Enable Illegal Migration (FENCE) Act,” led by Senator Bill Hagerty (R-TN), would revoke the tax-exempt status of organizations that provide financial assistance, benefits, services, or other material support to individuals alleged to be unlawfully present in the United States.

House bill H.R. 1168, reintroduced by Rep. Lance Gooden (R-TX-5), “Protecting Federal Funds from Human Trafficking and Smuggling Act,” would prohibit any federal funding to, and prohibit tax-exempt status for, a nonprofit unless the organization certifies it is in compliance with a subjective interpretation of federal immigration law related to facilitating the unlawful entry of noncitizens.

⁸ USCCB News Release: “The Catholic Church maintains its stance of not endorsing or opposing political candidates,” 8 July 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/catholic-church-maintains-its-stance-not-endorsing-or-opposing-political-candidates.

Beyond submitting to certification, the bill would also empower the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to make unilateral, extrajudicial determinations regarding whether an organization has violated the criminal provisions in question and instruct the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a strategy for improving nonprofits’ cooperation in deterring, detecting, reporting, and removing noncitizens.

While not adopting a formal position on these bills, the USCCB has strongly and consistently opposed the sorts of provisions they contain.⁹ For example, in 2023, the USCCB opposed the “Secure the Border Act,” a sweeping piece of immigration legislation covering many different issues, when introduced during the previous Congress; a specific cause of the USCCB’s opposition was provisions in the bill similar to those contained in S. 497 and H.R. 1168.¹⁰

House Judiciary Committee Investigation

In late July, the House Judiciary Committee published a staff report, “How the Biden-Wray FBI Manufactured a False Narrative

⁹ Bishop Mark Seitz, “Letter on H.R. 2,” 5 May 2023: www.usccb.org/resources/USCCB%20Letter%20on%20H.R.%202.pdf.

¹⁰ For further information, see “Backgrounder: Religious Liberty, Migration, and the Border,” www.usccb.org/resources/Religious_Liberty_Migration_Border.pdf.

of Catholic Americans as Violent Extremists.”¹¹ The report presents findings from the Judiciary Committee’s investigation into the FBI’s issuance of a memorandum from the Richmond Field Office that assessed that “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists” are increasingly showing interest in “radical-traditionalist Catholic ideology,” and that this interest presents new opportunities for “source development.” The report includes new information about the FBI’s efforts to gather information in the wake of the Richmond Field Office Memo. It claims that, regarding an investigation of a suspected terrorist, “the FBI attempted to violate the priest-penitent privilege on the faulty reasoning that the Richmond subject under investigation seeking spiritual guidance had not been baptized or completed catechism.”¹² The USCCB has not been involved in the investigative work of the Judiciary Committee.

11 House Judiciary Committee, “How the Biden-Wray FBI Manufactured a False Narrative of Catholic Americans as Violent Extremists,” 22 July 2025: judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/2025-07/2025-07-22_How-the-Biden-Wray-FBI-Manufactured-False-Narrative-of-Catholic-Americans-as-Violent-Extremists-Report_Final.pdf.

12 See also Kate Scanlon, *OSV News*, “Report: FBI surveilled SSPX priest amid probe of suspected neo-Nazi’s plans for violence,” 25 July 2025: www.osvnews.com/report-fbi-surveilled-spx-priest-amid-probe-of-suspected-neo-nazis-plans-for-violence/.

Section IV:

Religious Liberty and the Executive Branch



Following his inauguration as forty-seventh president of the United States, Donald Trump immediately took action to implement his agenda. Many of the executive actions President Trump has taken have both positive and negative religious liberty implications.

Gender Ideology

As last year's Annual Report stated, "gender ideology has corroded religious liberty in recent years." Policies on gender identity implicate religious

liberty when religious individuals and organizations are forced to defend their recognition of sexual difference. The Trump administration took steps to combat gender ideology.

Policies on gender identity implicate religious liberty when religious individuals and organizations are forced to defend their recognition of sexual difference.

On his first day in office, President Trump rescinded seventy-eight executive orders and memoranda issued by the Biden administration.¹³ Among these was an Executive Order (EO) called “Preventing and Combating Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity or Sexual Orientation,” which directed government agencies to revise regulations to include prohibitions on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation gender identity. That resulted in the Department of Education (USDE) including gender identity in its interpretation of Title IX, which protects against discrimination the basis of sex in educational programs receiving federal financial assistance.

President Trump also issued an EO directing federal agencies to enforce sex-based distinctions in accordance with “the biological reality of sex” and not “gender identity,”¹⁴ and he issued another that prohibits federal funding for interventions that aim to transform the sexual characteristics of a human

body into those of the opposite sex.¹⁵ Bishop Robert Barron, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth, issued a statement in response, saying, “Helping young people accept their bodies and their vocation as women and men is the true path of freedom and happiness.”¹⁶

Following these directives, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued guidance for agencies and external partners on a binary understanding of sex based in biology,¹⁷ and the Department of Justice (DOJ) proposed legislation

15 EO 14187: Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation, 28 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02194/protecting-children-from-chemical-and-surgical-mutilation.

16 USCCB News Release: “Helping young people accept their bodies and their vocation as women and men is the true path of freedom and happiness,” says Bishop Barron, 29 January 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/helping-young-people-accept-their-bodies-and-their-vocation-women-and-men-true-path.

17 HHS News Release: HHS Takes Action on President Trump’s Executive Orders Defending Women and Children, 19 February 2025: www.hhs.gov/about/news/2025/02/19/hhs-takes-action-president-trumps-executive-orders-defending-women-children.html; Guidance for Federal Agencies, External Partners, and the Public Implementing Executive Order 14168, Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government, 19 February 2025: womenshealth.gov/sites/default/files/_images/2025/2.19.25%20Defining%20Sex%20Guidance%20for%20Federal%20Agencies%2C%20External%20Partners%2C%20and%20the%20Public%20FINAL.pdf.

13 EO 14148: Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions, 20 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/28/2025-01901/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions.

14 EO 14168: Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government, 20 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02090/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government.

that aims to protect children from procedures intended to disrupt the natural development of an individual's sex characteristics or to attempt to change an individual's sex.¹⁸

The Trump administration also took steps to protect girls and women's sports. He issued an EO instructing agencies to ensure that Title IX protects females in sports and the Secretary of State to promote a policy of biology rather than identity in governing bodies for international competition.¹⁹ Bishop Barron and Bishop David O'Connell, chairman of the Committee on Catholic Education, welcomed the Order, saying "Consistent with the Catholic Church's clear teaching on the equality of men and women, we reaffirm that, in education and in sports as elsewhere, policies must uphold human dignity. This includes equal treatment between women and men and affirmation of the goodness of a person's body, which is genetically

and biologically female or male."²⁰

Bishop Barron and Bishop David O'Connell, chairman of the Committee on Catholic Education, welcomed the Order, saying "Consistent with the Catholic Church's clear teaching on the equality of men and women, we reaffirm that, in education and in sports as elsewhere, policies must uphold human dignity."

Pursuant to the EO, the HHS Office of Civil Rights (OCR) initiated a compliance review of the Maine Department of Education to ensure that the state has not been allowing biological males to compete in women's sports.²¹ In April, HHS published whistleblower guidance and launched a complaint portal for

18 DOJ News Release: The Department of Justice Proposes Legislation to Protect Children from Gender Mutilation, 3 September 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/department-justice-proposes-legislation-protect-children-gender-mutilation; the proposed "Victims of Chemical or Surgical Mutilation Act" is available at www.justice.gov/opa/media/1412656/dl?inline.

19 EO 14201, Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports, 2 February 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/11/2025-02513/keeping-men-out-of-womens-sports.

20 USCCB News Release: "We Welcome the President's Executive Order that Protects Opportunities for Women and Girls to Compete in Sports Safely and Fairly," 6 February 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/we-welcome-presidents-executive-order-protects-opportunities-women-and-girls-compete.

21 HHS News Release: HHS' Civil Rights Office Acts to Keep Men out of Women's Sports, 21 February 2025: www.hhs.gov/about/news/2025/02/21/hhs-civil-rights-office-acts-keep-men-out-womens-sports.html.

whistleblowers on the Chemical and Surgical Mutilation of Children.²² HHS OCR also investigated Minnesota for allowing males to compete in sports reserved for females and both USDE and HHS ultimately found that Minnesota had violated Title IX.²³ HHS OCR also launched an investigation of a state health department, assessing whether it, among other things is “Discriminating against faith-based organizations in the administration and/or enforcement of licensing requirements, including requiring any facilitation of sex-rejecting procedures and female genital mutilation (FGM) and treating religious objections as grounds for adverse licensure action, including denial or termination of professional licenses.”²⁴

HHS also issued a clarification that in the final rule, “Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial

Assistance,” published in 2024, the preamble—which said that gender dysphoria can be considered as a disability—does not have the force of law.²⁵

The HHS Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy, issued a declaration highlighting the harms of sex-rejecting procedures, stating that “Sex-rejecting procedures for children and adolescents are neither safe nor effective as a treatment modality for gender dysphoria, gender incongruence, or other related disorders in minors, and therefore, fail to meet professional recognized standards of health care.”²⁶

22 HHS News Release: HHS Takes Action to Protect Whistleblowers who Defend Children and Launches First Conscience Investigation, 14 April 2025: www.hhs.gov/press-room/hhs-launches-whistleblower-form-to-protect-kids.html.

23 HHS News Release: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Find that Minnesota Violated Title IX, 30 September 2025: www.hhs.gov/press-room/ocr-title-ix-investigation-mn.html.

24 HHS News Release: HHS’ Office for Civil Rights Examines Whether State Licensing Practices Comply with Federal Conscience and Equal Treatment Laws and Regulations, 9 December 2025: www.hhs.gov/press-room/ocr-investigates-state-to-protect-conscience-and-faith-based-organizations.html.

25 Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance; Clarification, 11 April 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/04/11/2025-06127/nondiscrimination-on-the-basis-of-disability-in-programs-or-activities-receiving-federal-financial.

26 Declaration of the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services: Safety, Effectiveness, and Professional Standards of Care for Sex-Rejecting Procedures on Children and Adolescents, 18 December 2025, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/declaration-pediatric-sex-rejecting-procedures.pdf>

Partnership between Religious Organizations and the Government

The Trump administration has signaled that it wishes to cultivate partnerships with faith-based organizations. In the first weeks of the administration, the President established the White House Faith Office within its Domestic Policy, stating that “Government welcomes opportunities to partner with [faith-based entities] through innovative, measurable, and outcome-driven initiatives.” This office was first established by President George W. Bush.²⁷ The President also issued a memo directing agencies to repeal regulatory provisions that are unlawful in light of recent decisions of the United States Supreme Court. One of the decisions listed in the memo is *Carson v. Makin*, which makes clear that governments may not exclude religious organizations from participation in government programs because they engage in religious activity.²⁸

The President also issued an EO directing agencies to expand school



choice by, among other things, issuing guidance and reviewing mechanisms that would allow families to use federal funds for faith-based schools.²⁹ Bishop David O’Connell welcomed the action, saying “The Catholic Church teaches that parents are the primary educators of their children and have both the right and responsibility to

27 EO 14205: Establishment of the White House Faith Office, 7 February 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/12/2025-02635/establishment-of-the-white-house-faith-office.

28 Memo: Directing the Repeal of Unlawful Regulations, 9 April 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/directing-the-repeal-of-unlawful-regulations/.

29 EO 14191: Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families, 29 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02233/expanding-educational-freedom-and-opportunity-for-families/.

direct their child’s education.”³⁰ In November, President Trump issued an EO directing HHS to work with the First Lady to develop a program to modernize the foster care system, which would include developing relationships between government and faith-based foster care providers.³¹

A countervailing effort on the part of the Trump administration, however, has been to apply pressure on nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, through changes made to federal programs, particularly those serving noncitizens. For example, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) amended its Standard Terms and Conditions in April 2025, including changes that prompted concern from religious organizations because of ways in which they would burden religious freedom.³² A further policy change possibly paving the way for coercion of religious organizations

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is the new interpretation of “federal public benefit,” which the USCCB opposed, in part, because of its potential to require that organizations assist in immigration enforcement. Such an outcome, the USCCB observed, is contrary to the underlying statute.³³

Conscience and Health Care

IVF Mandates

The USCCB supports restorative, ethical reproductive medicine, and opposes any policy or action that forces others to subsidize or facilitate

30 USCCB News Release: Bishop O’Connell Welcomes New Executive Actions Promoting Parental Choice in Education, 31 January 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/bishop-oconnell-welcomes-new-executive-actions-promoting-parental-choice-education.

31 EO 14359: Fostering the Future of American Children and Families, 12 November 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/11/19/2025-20406/fostering-the-future-for-american-children-and-families.

32 See, for example, Laura Tillman and Lisa Hagen, “CT Jewish leaders denounce new rules for federal security grants,” *CT Mirror*, 22 August 2025: ctmirror.org/2025/08/22/ct-jewish-leaders-federal-nonprofit-security-grants-dhs/.

33 USCCB Comments on “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA); Interpretation of ‘Federal Public Benefit’,” 13 August 2025: [www.usccb.org/resources/USCCB%20HHS%20Comment%20on%20Federal%20Public%20Benefits%20Interpretation%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.usccb.org/resources/USCCB%20HHS%20Comment%20on%20Federal%20Public%20Benefits%20Interpretation%20(1).pdf)

artificial reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). In terms of religious liberty concerns, an IVF mandate, in addition to attacking life, the family, and human dignity, could also offend the consciences of medical professionals who object to participating in these procedures, and employers and health care providers who object to facilitating or subsidizing them.

Last February, President Trump issued an EO directing the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy to submit recommendations on how to lower the cost and increase access to IVF.³⁴ Bishop Daniel Thomas, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, and Bishop Barron responded to the order, saying “The IVF industry treats human beings like products and freezes or kills millions of children who are not selected for transfer to a womb or do not survive. Tuesday’s executive order promoting IVF is thus fatally flawed and stands in regrettable contrast to the promising pro-life actions of the administration last month.”³⁵ On October 16, the White House announced its policy recommendations to expand access to IVF, which included the creation of a

“New Benefit Option” for insurance coverage of fertility benefits.³⁶ This allows employers to offer standalone benefit packages to cover fertility treatments, including IVF and treatments that aim to restore fertility by addressing root causes.³⁷ The White House also announced that the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Treasury would undertake rulemaking to further expand the ability of employers to offer fertility benefits. It thus appears that a mandate was ultimately avoided, but the USCCB will continue to track and respond as necessary to how these policies are implemented.

Pro-Life Issues

On January 23, President Trump pardoned pro-life activists who had been convicted under the FACE Act for blocking access to an abortion clinic.³⁸ Bishop Thomas recognized the action, saying “Pro-life Americans have

34 EO 14216: Expanding Access to In Vitro Fertilization, 18 February 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/24/2025-03064/expanding-access-to-in-vitro-fertilization.

35 USCCB News Release: IVF Destroys Human Life, Bishops Urge Ethical Alternatives, 20 February 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/ivf-destroys-human-life-bishops-urge-ethical-alternatives.

36 Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Announces Actions to Lower Costs and Expand Access to In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) and High-Quality Fertility Care, 16 October 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/10/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-announces-actions-to-lower-costs-and-expand-access-to-in-vitro-fertilization-ivf-and-high-quality-fertility-care/.

37 Department of Labor: FAQs about Affordable Care Act Implementation Part 72, 16 October 2025: www.dol.gov/agencies/ebsa/about-ebsa/our-activities/resource-center/faqs/aca-part-72.

38 President Trump, Executive Grant of Clemency, 23 January 2025: www.justice.gov/pardon/media/1386366/dl.



a right to pray in public, to counsel women who are considering abortion, and to peacefully protest. We welcome support for men and women who are exercising these rights to witness to a culture of life, and, at the same time, we absolutely reject resorting to force or violence.”³⁹

Immigration

DHS issued a memorandum on January 20, 2025, rescinding guidance from the previous administration, which required that, absent exigent circumstances, immigration officers needed approval from their Agency’s headquarters before carrying out enforcement activities in or near protected areas (otherwise known as

“sensitive locations”), such as hospitals, schools, and churches.⁴⁰ Prior to this, the guidance had existed in one form or another since the Clinton administration. Bishop Rhoades published an op-ed on *OSV News*, which argued that, while governments do have a right to enforce immigration laws, creating a climate of fear around the right to go to church damages the conditions necessary to foster the religious life of the nation (see *Dignitatis humanae*, 6).⁴¹ Shortly after the rescission, Bishop Seitz, as chairman of the Committee on Migration, also issued a statement jointly with the heads of Catholic

40 DHS Memo: Memorandum on Enforcement Actions in or Near Protected Areas, 20 January 2025: www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/25_0120_S1_enforcement-actions-in-near-protected-areas.pdf.

41 Bishop Rhoades, *OSV News*, “Freedom of worship for migrants,” 31 January 2025: www.osvnews.com/bishop-rhoades-freedom-of-worship-for-migrants/.

39 USCCB News Release: Bishop Thomas Welcomes Restoration of Protections for Pre-born Children, 26 January 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/bishop-thomas-welcomes-restoration-protections-preborn-children.

Charities USA and the Catholic Health Association.⁴²

In 2025, there are no known instances of immigration enforcement operations occurring *within* a Catholic church. One of the few prominent examples of an action on church grounds occurred in San Bernardino, California, when a parishioner was arrested outdoors while working on the landscaping. At the same time, anecdotal reports suggest a drop in attendance at Mass in some dioceses and parish communities because of parishioners' fears of ICE enforcement, whether at or traveling to and from church. In response, five bishops have taken the extraordinary step of dispensing Catholics from their Sunday obligation if they fear that going to Mass puts them at risk of being detained. In addition to people experiencing reticence to attend Mass, some have also refrained from sending their children to Catholic schools and accessing social services provided by the Church. Some Catholic dioceses and parishes have also felt unable to proceed with certain liturgical celebrations, religious festivals, gatherings, and other events known to be popular among immigration communities, such as those related to Our Lady of Guadalupe, for fear

of becoming a target of immigration enforcement.⁴³

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There have been several lawsuits challenging the rescission of the protected areas guidance. With the exception of one preliminary injunction applying to a narrow set of plaintiffs, these lawsuits have largely proven unsuccessful thus far.

Consistent access to immigration detention facilities for the purpose of providing religious and pastoral services to detainees has been a challenge. Inconsistent policies from facility to facility have prevented some detainees from receiving regular access to the sacraments, contrary to ICE's own standards.

⁴² USCCB News Release: "Human Dignity is Not Dependent on a Person's Citizenship or Immigration Status," 23 January 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/human-dignity-not-dependent-persons-citizenship-or-immigration-status.

⁴³ Luis Avila, *KESQ News*, "Ongoing immigration crackdowns force cancellation of Our Lady of Guadalupe pilgrimage," 9 September 2025: kesq.com/news/2025/09/09/ongoing-immigration-crackdowns-force-cancellation-of-our-lady-of-guadalupe-pilgrimage/.

Antisemitism

Early in his administration, President Trump undertook several actions intended to address antisemitism, particularly as antisemitic harassment and assaults have arisen in the context of protests over the conflict between Israel and Hamas. On January 29, the president issued an EO directing agencies to submit reports on ways to combat antisemitism.⁴⁴ Days later, the DOJ announced the Formation of a Federal Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism.⁴⁵ The Task Force has launched investigations of universities—such as the University of California, George Washington University, and Columbia University—for allegedly violating the civil rights of

In September, the DOJ charged a group of protesters under the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act for engaging in violence outside of synagogue in New Jersey.

⁴⁴ EO 14188: Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism, 29 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02230/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism.

⁴⁵ DOJ Press Release: Justice Department Announces Formation of Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism, 3 February 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-formation-task-force-combat-anti-semitism.

Jewish students following the October 7 attacks in 2023.⁴⁶

In September, the DOJ charged a group of protesters under the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act for engaging in violence outside of synagogue in New Jersey. The FACE Act was passed under President Bill Clinton to protect abortion clinics, but it includes provisions that protect houses of worship. Assistant Attorney General Harmeet K. Dhillon of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division stated, "Those who target houses of worship and violate our federal laws protecting people of faith are on notice that they will face the consequences."⁴⁷

46 USDE Press Release: ED, HHS, and GSA Announce Additional Measures to End Anti-Semitic Harassment on College Campuses, 3 March 2024: www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/ed-hhs-and-gsa-announce-additional-measures-end-anti-semitic-harassment-college-campuses. DOJ Press Release: U.S. Justice Department Launches Investigation of University of California Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 5 March 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-justice-department-launches-investigation-university-california-under-title-vii-civil; DOJ Press Release: Justice Department Finds George Washington University Deliberately Indifferent to Antisemitic Discrimination, 12 August 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-finds-george-washington-university-deliberately-indifferent-antisemitic.

47 DOJ Press Release: Justice Department Files Lawsuit Under the FACE Act Against Violent Protestors at Synagogue in West Orange, New Jersey, 29 September 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-files-lawsuit-under-face-act-against-violent-protestors-synagogue-west.

Debanking

As reported last year, individuals have in recent years raised concerns that banks are discriminating on the basis of political and religious viewpoints. On August 7, President Trump issued an EO addressing the issue of “debanking,” ordering regulators to “remove the use of reputation risk or equivalent concepts that could result in politicized or unlawful debanking” and to notify financial institutions that they must reinstate clients who were debanked and identify potential clients that were denied services, and ordering Treasury to develop a strategy to combat debanking.⁴⁸ The USCCB has not taken a public position on debanking.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Trump administration has taken actions against programs that often go under the name of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). President Trump issued an EO requiring that DEI programs and practices within government agencies be eliminated.⁴⁹ He issued another EO on ending “indoctrination” in K-12 schools, which seeks to eliminate “Federal funding or support for illegal and discriminatory treatment and indoctrination in K-12 schools, including based on gender ideology and discriminatory equity ideology.”⁵⁰ The term “discriminatory equity ideology,” as used in the order and subsequent agency advisories, targets policies that advantage or disadvantage persons based on protected characteristics—for example, race-exclusive scholarships, set-asides, or trainings that condition benefits on agreement with contested concepts. In July, the DOJ issued non binding guidance warning recipients of federal funds that such practices may risk

49 EO 14151: Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing, 20 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing.

50 EO 14190: Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling, 29 January 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02232/ending-radical-indoctrination-in-k-12-schooling.

48 EO 14331:Guaranteeing Fair Banking for All Americans, 7 August 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/12/2025-15341/guaranteeing-fair-banking-for-all-americans.

violations and loss of funding.⁵¹ At the same time, consistent with the First Amendment, the government may not retaliate against private religious universities for lawful curricular speech outside a funded program, such as, by barring their students from neutral government opportunities based on the school's academic choices. As the bishops affirmed in *Open Wide Our Hearts*, Catholic educational institutions are called to teach about the history and continuing reality of racism and to form consciences in light of the equal dignity of every person.⁵² Such formation can and should be carried out in ways fully consistent with civil rights laws.

Religious Liberty Commission

On May 1, 2025, President Trump signed an EO establishing a Religious Liberty Commission.⁵³ The Commission is led by Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, and its term will last one year, ending on July 4, 2026. The Commission holds regularly scheduled hearings, with the goal of producing a comprehensive report and recommendations for the President at the end of its term. The Commission is advised by boards, including an Advisory Board of Religious Leaders. Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Bishop Robert Barron serve on the Commission. Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, Bishop Kevin Rhoades, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki serve on an Advisory Board.⁵⁴

53 EO 14291: Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission, 1 May 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/establishment-of-the-religious-liberty-commission/. Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Establishes the Religious Liberty Commission: www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-establishes-the-religious-liberty-commission/.

54 President Trump Announces Religious Liberty Commission Members, 1 May 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/05/president-trump-announces-religious-liberty-commission-members/. President Donald Trump Names Advisory Board Members to the Religious Liberty Commission, 16 May 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/05/president-donald-trump-names-advisory-board-members-to-the-religious-liberty-commission/.

51 DOJ Press Release: Justice Department Releases Guidance for Recipients of Federal Funding Regarding Unlawful Discrimination, 30 July 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-releases-guidance-recipients-federal-funding-regarding-unlawful.

52 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism,” November 2018: www.usccb.org/resources/open-wide-our-hearts-enduring-call-love-pastoral-letter-against-racism.

Anti-Christian Bias Task Force

On February 6, President Trump issued an EO establishing a task force led by the Attorney General aimed at eliminating anti-Christian bias in federal agencies.⁵⁵ In April, Attorney General Pamela Bondi convened a meeting of cabinet members to report on cases within their own agencies and to hear from witnesses who shared their stories of religious discrimination, and the task force presented an initial report in June.⁵⁶

55 EO 14202: Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias, 6 February 2025: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/12/2025-02611/eradicating-anti-christian-bias.

56 DOJ Press Release: Attorney General Pamela Bondi Hosts First Task Force Meeting to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias in the Federal Government, 22 April 2025: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-pamela-bondi-hosts-first-task-force-meeting-eradicate-anti-christian-bias; Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias within the Federal Government: The Initial Report by the Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias, 6 June 2025: static.foxnews.com/fox-news.com/content/uploads/2025/09/anti-christian-bias-report.pdf.

Section V:

Religious Liberty and the Supreme Court

2025 was an exceptionally active year for religious liberty before the Supreme Court. The Court issued three rulings in cases squarely addressing religious liberty issues: two victories and one split decision that left in place an adverse ruling below. In a fourth ruling, in *U.S. v. Skrmetti*, the Court declined to hold that people identifying

as transgender are a protected class under the Equal Protection Clause—a result that would have had disastrous consequences for religious exercise. The Court also granted certiorari in a pair of cases that present a similar question, to be argued and decided in 2026.



Rulings

Catholic Charities Bureau, Inc. v. Wisconsin Labor & Industry Commission (U.S. No. 24-154)

Catholic Charities Bureau of the Diocese of Superior (CCB) brought suit after being denied an exemption from a requirement to pay state unemployment taxes, in order to participate instead in a church-run program that offers the same level of benefits. State law provides an exemption for non-profit organizations operated primarily for religious purposes, but the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld a finding that CCB is not primarily operated for religious purposes. The court reasoned that CCB does not do “typical” religious things like proselytize or hold worship services and does not primarily employ and serve Catholics. The court also held that, because CCB is separately incorporated from the Diocese of Superior, CCB cannot derive its religious purpose from the Diocese. The Supreme Court granted review to determine whether a state violates the First Amendment’s religion clauses by denying a religious organization an otherwise-available tax exemption because the organization does not meet the state’s criteria for religious behavior. The Court unanimously ruled that Wisconsin had imposed an impermissible denominational preference by differentiating between religions based on theological lines.

The Court unanimously ruled that Wisconsin had imposed an impermissible denominational preference by differentiating between religions based on theological lines.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel joined an interfaith amicus brief arguing that the Wisconsin Supreme Court’s ruling violates the principle of church autonomy and undermines religious organizations’ ability to fulfill their religious missions as their faiths require. The brief is available at www.usccb.org/resources/25-0203_CCB_v_WILaborIndustry.pdf.

Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond (U.S. No. 24-394), consolidated with St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School (U.S. No. 24-396)

Oklahoma’s state constitution and its statute governing charter schools prohibit state funds from going to religious entities. However, Oklahoma’s previous attorney general determined that such an exclusion violates the First Amendment. St. Isidore’s Virtual Catholic Charter



School, a joint project of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and the Diocese of Tulsa, applied for and received approval from the Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board to contract with the state to operate as a virtual charter school. The new Oklahoma Attorney General then intervened and obtained a ruling from the Oklahoma Supreme Court invalidating the approval. The court held that excluding St. Isidore's does not violate the Free Exercise Clause, and that public charter schools under Oklahoma law are legally equivalent to government entities (state actors), so it would violate the Establishment Clause for a public charter school to be religious.

The Supreme Court granted review on both central aspects of the Oklahoma Supreme Court's ruling. Justice Barrett recused herself from the case for undisclosed reasons. The Court issued an evenly split 4-4 per curiam opinion (an opinion from the Court as a whole, not attributed to any justice), leaving in place the Oklahoma Supreme Court's ruling. The opinion included no explanation of either side's reasoning.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel filed an amicus brief in support of St. Isidore's, focusing on how the history of Catholic education in America shows that education is not traditionally the exclusive province of the state. The brief is available at www.usccb.org/resources/25-0312%20Isidore_vDrummond.pdf.

Mahmoud v. Taylor (U.S. No. 24-297)

A Maryland public school district refused to allow parents to opt for their elementary-school children out of curricular content promoting gender ideology. An interfaith coalition of parents sued, alleging that the district's refusal violates their religious freedom under the First Amendment. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, emphasizing that the parents had not yet presented enough evidence on how the objectionable content and materials were being used in classrooms, denied the parents' request for a preliminary injunction.

The Supreme Court granted review to determine whether public schools burden parents' religious exercise when they compel elementary school children to participate in instruction on gender and sexuality against their parents' religious convictions and without notice or opportunity to opt out. In a 6-3 ruling, the Court held that a state-imposed burden on the parental right to control the religious upbringing of one's children triggers strict scrutiny, which Montgomery County failed because it permits opt-outs for various reasons other than religious objections. The Court viewed the parents' case as akin to *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, a seminal First Amendment case in which the Court struck down a Wisconsin law that compelled Amish children, contrary to Amish religious beliefs, to attend school past the age of fourteen.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel joined an interfaith amicus brief led by the LDS Church, arguing that the petitioners' beliefs are widely held and that a finding of direct coercion is not a necessary condition for judicial protection of religious exercise. It is available at www.usccb.org/resources/25-0312_Mahmoud_v_Taylor.pdf.

In a 6-3 ruling, the Court held that a state-imposed burden on the parental right to control the religious upbringing of one's children triggers strict scrutiny, which Montgomery County failed because it permits opt-outs for various reasons other than religious objections.

U.S. v. Skrmetti (U.S. No. 23-477)

Tennessee, like twenty-three other states, passed a law prohibiting the performance of "gender transition" procedures on children. The federal government sued, arguing that the law constitutes sex-based discrimination that is prohibited under the Equal Protection Clause. The Sixth Circuit upheld the law, finding that it draws no impermissible distinctions among

classes of people, but rather treats similarly situated individuals similarly.

The Supreme Court granted review on the question of whether Tennessee's law violates the Equal Protection Clause. The Court, with Chief Justice Roberts writing for a six-justice majority, ruled that Tennessee's law does not violate the Equal Protection Clause because it draws distinctions on the basis of different medical uses of the relevant drugs and procedures, rather than classifying on the basis of sex or transgender status. Because the Court found the law did not classify on the basis of transgender status, it did not reach the question of whether transgender status is a protected class under the Equal Protection Clause.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel's amicus brief opened by explaining the Church's teaching that "The body is not an object, a mere tool at the disposal of the soul, one that each person may dispose of according to his or her own will, but it is a constitutive part of the human subject, a gift to be received, respected, and cared for as something intrinsic to the person." It then emphasized the peril for religious liberty that a ruling against Tennessee would pose. The brief is available at [www.usccb.org/resources/24-1016_Skrmetti\(FILED%20FINAL.pdf\)](http://www.usccb.org/resources/24-1016_Skrmetti(FILED%20FINAL.pdf)).

Oral Arguments

Chiles v. Salazar
(U.S. No. 24-539)

In 2019, Colorado passed a "conversion therapy" ban that prohibits licensed counselors from engaging "any practice or treatment ... that attempts or purports to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity." Kaley Chiles, a licensed counselor whose practice of talk-based therapy is guided by her Christian faith, sued on the basis that the law infringes the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment. The Tenth Circuit upheld Colorado's law on the basis that it regulates conduct, not speech. The Supreme Court granted review on the question of whether a law that censors certain conversations between counselors and their clients based on the viewpoints expressed regulates conduct or violates the Free Speech Clause.

In 2019, Colorado passed a “conversion therapy” ban that prohibits licensed counselors from engaging “any practice or treatment ... that attempts or purports to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity.” Kaley Chiles, a licensed counselor whose practice of talk-based therapy is guided by her Christian faith, sued on the basis that the law infringes the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel filed an amicus brief, joined by the Colorado Catholic Conference and the Catholic University of America. The brief emphasizes the dangers of a ruling that the Free Speech Clause permits censorship of conversations on a topic as profound and fundamental as sexuality and sexual morality. It is available at www.usccb.org/resources/25-0701_24-539%20Amici%20Brief.pdf.

First Choice Women’s Resource Centers, Inc. v. Platkin
(U.S. No. 24-781)

New Jersey’s Attorney General served an investigatory subpoena on First Choice Women’s Resource Centers, Inc., a faith-based pregnancy center, demanding that it turn over most of its donors’ names. First Choice challenged the subpoena in federal court under 42 U.S.C. 1983, a federal statute that creates a private right of action for deprivation of rights protected under federal law. The Attorney General filed a subsequent suit to enforce the subpoena in state court. The state court granted the Attorney General’s motion to enforce the subpoena but expressly did not decide First Choice’s federal constitutional challenges. The Attorney General then moved in state court to sanction First Choice. Meanwhile, the federal district court held that First Choice’s constitutional claims were not ripe for review. The Third Circuit affirmed, First Choice sought Supreme Court review, and the Court granted it.

While the case presents a question about the availability of federal courts to hear claims for deprivation of constitutional rights, not about the constitutionality of compelling disclosure of donor rolls, its implications for religious institutions’ freedom from government intrusion are substantial. The USCCB Office of General Counsel filed an amicus brief focusing on how compelled disclosure

laws threaten church autonomy: www.usccb.org/resources/25-0903_USCCB_AB_First%20Choice%20v.%20Platkin.pdf. Oral argument in the case took place on December 3.

Landor v. Louisiana Department of Corrections (U.S. No. 23-1197)

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) has a sister statute, Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), specifically governing religious freedom in the contexts of prisons and land use. Courts have generally interpreted the two statutes' identical text to carry identical meanings. In the 2020 case *Tanzin v. Tanvir*, the Supreme Court held that government officials can be liable for money damages in their individual capacities for violations of RFRA.

Damon Landor is a devout Rastafarian and an inmate in the Louisiana prison system. When he was transferred to a new prison, he brought a copy of a Fifth Circuit decision holding that RLUIPA gave him a right to keep his dreadlocks. Prison officials responded by throwing that decision into the trash, strapping Landor down, and shaving him bald. He sued, seeking monetary damages from the individual prison officials responsible. Based on its own precedent, the Fifth Circuit held that individual money damages are not available under RLUIPA, *Tanzin* notwithstanding. The key

difference to the court was that, while RFRA was enacted under Congress's power under Section 5 of the 14th Amendment, Congress passed RLUIPA under its Spending Clause power.

The Supreme Court granted Landor's petition for certiorari, and oral arguments were held on November 10.

Grants and Denials of Certiorari

Little v. Hecox (U.S. No. 24-38); *West Virginia v. B.P.J.* (U.S. No. 24-43) (cert. granted)

Idaho and West Virginia have laws requiring that sports teams at schools in their states be separated by sex. In both states, male students who identify as female challenged the laws. The 9th Circuit ruled that Idaho's law violates the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause, and the 4th Circuit ruled that West Virginia's law violates both the Equal Protection Clause and Title IX's prohibition on sex discrimination.

The Supreme Court granted review on both bases.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel filed an amicus brief in support of the states. Because the USCCB's brief in *U.S. v. Skrmetti* addressed the issue of transgender status under the Equal Protection Clause, the brief focuses on the Title IX question. Numerous religious liberty problems have arisen from

federal agencies and courts interpreting Title IX to prohibit gender identity discrimination, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' gender transition mandate under Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, which incorporates Title IX's sex discrimination standard by reference.

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The USCCB's brief is available at www.usccb.org/resources/25-0925_AMICUS%20BRIEFS%20Little%20v%20Hecox.pdf. Oral argument in the case is scheduled for January 13, 2026.

Apache Stronghold v. United States (U.S. No. 24-291)
(reh'g denied)

Oak Flat, a site sacred to the Western Apaches, sits on land owned by the federal government, which plans to transfer it to a copper mining company that will completely destroy it. Apache Stronghold, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting Native American sacred sites, brought suit challenging the transfer of the land under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The Ninth Circuit held that the destruction of the site would not substantially burden the Apaches' religious exercise. Apache Stronghold filed a petition for certiorari to the Supreme Court, but the Court declined to take the case and denied Apache Stronghold's petition for rehearing. With Justice Alito recused from the case, Justices Gorsuch and Thomas dissented from the denial of certiorari.

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The USCCB, together with the Christian Legal Society and the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops, filed an amicus brief in support of Apache Stronghold's petition for certiorari. The brief argued that the Ninth Circuit misunderstood the meaning of the term "substantial burden" under RFRA, particularly with regard to an earlier decision by the Supreme Court called *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association*. In *Lyng*, the Court found that the Free Exercise Clause did not prohibit the federal government from building a road through and possibly harvesting timber within a Native American sacred site. The brief argued that *Lyng* does not inform the term "substantial burden" in RFRA, and noted that *Lyng* played a significant role in the reasoning of the courts that upheld the so-called "accommodation" to the HHS contraceptive mandate.

The USCCB's brief is available at www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/amicus-briefs/upload/24-1016apachestrongholdfiledfinal.

Miller v. McDonald (U.S. No. 25-133)

In 2019, New York repealed the exemption in its school immunization law for religious objections to vaccines. The law now applies to all students attending public, private, or parochial schools, except those who qualify for the law's medical exemption. Two parents of Amish students,

three Amish schools, and an elected representative of all Amish schools in New York sued New York officials, claiming that the school immunization law infringes on their free exercise rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The Second Circuit upheld the law, reasoning that it is neutral toward religion and generally applicable, and therefore valid under *Employment Division v. Smith*. The court distinguished the case from *Wisconsin v. Yoder*.

The Amish filed a petition for certiorari, and the Supreme Court granted it, vacated the judgment below, and remanded the case to the Second Circuit for reconsideration in light of *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, which had applied *Yoder*.

Section VI:

National Trends in Law, Culture, and Politics

Violence, Threats of Violence, and Responses to Threats

Several attacks that took place over the course of the year have political and religious implications.⁵⁷ Motives for these attacks can be complex and difficult to assess. Nevertheless, they are troubling for Christians and other people of faith, who seek to build a society in which persons can engage one another on difficult issues without resorting to violence. Demonization of others has become normalized amongst political leaders and media personalities. Some of these incidents express some antagonism towards the religious identity of the victims. Other events seem to be symptoms of the mental health crisis in the United

States. In several cases, these incidents reveal a disturbing nihilism driven by internet memes and social media consumption.

Demonization of others has become normalized amongst political leaders and media personalities.

While Catholic churches continue to face problems with vandalism and arson, two incidents at Catholic facilities stand out in particular. First, on August 27, a shooter fired on a Mass being held for the beginning of the school year at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The shooter fired into the windows from outside the building, killing two children and injuring thirty people, twenty-six children and four adults. While the fact that the shooter was a biological male who identified as female prompted speculation that the attack was motivated by animus over the Church's teachings on human sexuality, investigation into the attack

⁵⁷ There were a number of acts of political violence that did not appear to implicate religion, such as attacks on ICE agents and the assassination of two state lawmakers in Minnesota. See Joe Walsh, *CBS News*, "Political violence has gripped the U.S. this year. Experts say it's not as simple as left and right," 27 October 2025: www.cbsnews.com/news/political-violence-experts-left-and-right/.



discerned no coherent motive.⁵⁸ A graduate of the school, he had written a manifesto and made videos and images expressing a mix of antisemitic, anti-Trump, racist, and anti-Catholic ideas, along with a strong desire to kill children.

In another incident, law enforcement officers removed a man who was armed with explosive devices from the front steps of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, D.C., prior to the church's annual Red Mass. This Mass marks the beginning of the Supreme Court's term, and it has often been attended by Catholic justices. The man had a tent in front of the church and was asked to move. After police took him into custody, they discovered

two hundred homemade incendiary devices in the tent. He had expressed anti-Catholic and antisemitic views, as well as hostility towards the Supreme Court justices.⁵⁹

One act of political violence that took place in 2025 has had, and will likely continue to have, broad repercussions in American political and religious culture. A conservative activist, Charlie Kirk, was fatally shot during one of his signature campus debates. Kirk founded the organization Turning Point USA, and regularly held open-air debates on college campuses. Kirk was influential in conservative politics, and some reports suggest that the suspected killer may have targeted Kirk because of

⁵⁸ Odette Yousef, NPR, “There is no message’: The search for ideological motives in the Minneapolis shooting,” 29 August 2025: www.npr.org/2025/08/29/nx-s1-5522038/minneapolis-shooting-motive.

⁵⁹ Richard Szczepanowski, *OSV News*, “Man arrested outside Washington cathedral ahead of Red Mass found to have explosives,” 7 October 2025: www.osvnews.com/man-arrested-outside-washington-cathedral-ahead-of-red-mass-found-to-have-explosives/.

his views on sexuality and gender.⁶⁰ His evangelical Christianity was prominent in his work and his political views. At the time of this writing, no clear motive had been established for the killing. The murder has led to a new round of concerns about polarization and political violence.⁶¹

The year also saw a number of other religiously and politically inflected acts of violence. On April 13, just hours after the first night of Passover, an arsonist firebombed the home of Joshua Shapiro, governor of Pennsylvania. The suspect stated that he targeted Gov. Shapiro because of “what he wants to do to the Palestinian people.”⁶² The next month, another horrific act of

violence took place in Washington, D.C. On May 22, a young couple, who both worked at the Israeli Embassy, were killed as they were leaving an event at the Capital Jewish Museum. The suspect attempted to enter the event but was prevented by security. After his arrest, he is reported to have chanted “free, free Palestine.”⁶³

On September 28, during a Sunday worship service, a man drove his truck into a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints chapel, opened fire on the congregants, and set the building on fire. The attack killed four people and injured eight. Reports surfaced that the suspect had animus toward LDS members following a break-up with his girlfriend. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has classified the crime as being motivated by anti-religious beliefs.⁶⁴

60 Jon Haworth and Megan Forrester, *ABC News*, “Tyler Robinson said he killed Charlie Kirk because he ‘spreads too much hate’: Officials,” 16 September 2025: abcnews.go.com/US/tyler-robinson-set-face-formal-charges-shooting-death/story?id=125614396; Jesse Beday, Hannah Schoenbaum, and John Seewer, *Associated Press*, “Suspect left note saying he planned to kill Charlie Kirk, later confessed in texts, prosecutor says,” 17 September 2025: <https://www.wyff4.com/article/tyler-robinson-capital-murder-charlie-kirk-assassination/66119457>.

61 Alfonso Serrano and Arie Perliger, *The Conversation*, ““This will not end here”: A scholar explains why Charlie Kirk’s killing could embolden political violence,” 11 September 2025: theconversation.com/this-will-not-end-here-a-scholar-explains-why-charlie-kirks-killing-could-embolden-political-violence-265060.

62 Aaron Katersky and Sasha Pezenik, *ABC News*, “Alleged arsonist targeted Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro over Palestine, search warrant says,” 16 April 2025: abcnews.go.com/US/alleged-aronist-targeted-pennsylvania-gov-josh-shapiro-palestine/story?id=120860365.

63 Pierre Thomas, Aaron Katersky, Josh Margolin, Jack Date, Luke Barr, T. Michelle Murphy, Jon Haworth, and Megan Forrester, *ABC News*, “2 Israeli Embassy staffers killed in ‘act of terror’ in Washington, DC,” 22 May 2025: abcnews.go.com/US/2-shot-fbi-field-office-washington-dc/story?id=122059162.

64 Justin A. Hinkley and Kelly House, *Bridge Michigan*, “FBI: Grand Blanc shooting was ‘targeted’ attack on Mormons: What we know,” 3 November 2025: bridgemi.com/michigan-government/reports-grand-blanc-attacker-held-grudges-against-mormons-what-we-know/; Tim Arango Anushka Patil and Thomas Fuller, *New York Times*, “Michigan Church Attacker Is Said to Have Held a Grudge Against Mormons,” 29 September 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/09/29/us/michigan-church-attack.html?unlocked_article_code=1.708.A751.RXIN-bxn-8x5g&smid=url-share.

Antisemitism

The promotion of religious liberty is bound up with opposition to antisemitism. The past two years have seen a disturbing rise in antisemitic acts and sentiments. To be sure, opposition to Israeli policies towards Palestinians or promotion of United States policies that prioritize American interests do not in themselves constitute antisemitism. However, much of the rhetoric surrounding Israel and the Jewish community in the past year went far beyond mere critique of policy.

A particularly concerning development has been the mainstreaming of antisemitic and neo-Nazi tropes among some conservative institutions and media figures. A major flashpoint took place in November, after the popular and influential pundit, Tucker Carlson, interviewed the young podcaster, Nick Fuentes. Like earlier generations of American entertainers, Fuentes has established his reputation, in part, by saying things most people find shocking, for example, claiming that the leader of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler, was “cool.” After the interview, Carlson faced the accusation that he did not sufficiently challenge Fuentes’s views. Following those accusations, the President of the Heritage Foundation, Kevin Roberts, released a video indicating his support for Carlson. These events served to put a spotlight on the mainstream conservative movement, with some reports indicating that as many as

thirty percent of young Republican government staff workers are sympathetic to the views of Fuentes.⁶⁵

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Attacks on Catholic Services in the Media

One of the goals of religious liberty advocacy has long been to ensure that faith-based organizations can freely cooperate with governments in order to advance the common good. The Trump administration seems to acknowledge the good work that religious groups do in some of its executive orders (see Section IV of this report). However, that work is undermined when media figures and political leaders accuse religious organizations of acting in bad faith when they participate in public programs.

In February, Vice President JD Vance was asked in an interview about

65 Michael Warren and John McCormack, *The Dispatch*, “Conservatism at a Crossroads,” 7 November 2025: thedispatch.com/article/heritage-foundation-kevin-roberts-tucker-carlson-nick-fuentes/.

criticism the administration had received over its immigration policies. In his response to the question, Vice President Vance suggested that the U.S. Catholic bishops have served immigrants and refugees in order to profit from government grants.⁶⁶ In fact, Catholic charitable services to noncitizens generally operate at a loss. Archbishop Timothy Broglio, then-president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement rebutting the remark.⁶⁷ Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, called the remarks “scurrilous.”⁶⁸ The remarks followed a pattern that the Committee for Religious Liberty has identified in previous reports of media figures making false and misleading claims about the work of the bishops and other Catholic ministries. Kim Daniels, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, commented, “It all comes down to an old strategy:

⁶⁶ Maria Wiering, *OSV News*, “Vance spars with US bishops over their pushback on Trump’s immigration policy,” 26 January 2025: www.osvnews.com/vance-spars-with-us-bishops-over-their-pushback-on-trumps-immigration-policy/.

⁶⁷ Kate Scanlon, *OSV News*, “Vance spars with US bishops over their pushback on Trump’s immigration policy,” 26 January 2025: www.osvnews.com/vance-spars-with-us-bishops-over-their-pushback-on-trumps-immigration-policy/.

⁶⁸ Jonah McKeown, *Catholic News Agency*, “Cardinal Dolan: Vance’s remarks on bishops and immigration ‘scurrilous,’ ‘very nasty,’” 29 January 2025: [www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/261889/cardinal-dolan-vance-s-remarks-on-bishops-and-immigration-scurrilous-very-nasty.](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/261889/cardinal-dolan-vance-s-remarks-on-bishops-and-immigration-scurrilous-very-nasty/)

politicians targeting Catholics for political gain.”⁶⁹

Christian Expression in the Federal Government

The Trump administration undertook a number of actions in 2025 to put religion at the center of public life, with a special focus on Christianity. In addition to the work of the Religious Liberty Commission, which has primarily highlighted issues affecting Christians, and the task force on anti-Christian bias, the administration developed an initiative called “America Prays” as part of its America 250 activities. The goal of America Prays is to encourage 1 million Americans to commit to praying 1 hour per week during the year-long celebration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United States.⁷⁰

The administration has taken other steps to indicate its support for public expressions of Christianity, including Catholicism President Trump issued messages for several Catholic feast days, including the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel and the Solemnity of the

⁶⁹ Kate Scanlon, *OSV News*, “Audited financials show claims the church profits from refugee work ‘just wrong,’” 31 January 2025: www.osvnews.com/audited-financials-show-claims-the-church-profits-from-refugee-work-just-wrong/.

⁷⁰ See America Prays: An Invitation to Prayer & Rededication of the United States as One Nation Under God: www.whitehouse.gov/america250/america-prays/.

Immaculate Conception.⁷¹ Executive agencies have also deployed Christian symbols on social media posts in ways that indicate the administration sees its activities in explicitly Christian terms.⁷²

There were also more subtle actions, such relocating a painting of Jesus to a more prominent place at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.⁷³ With these kinds of actions, some Christians see the “most Christian” administration they have ever known,⁷⁴ while others suggest that the use of Christian language and symbolism functions as “the pinch of incense that makes believers comfortable with worldly

deeds and choices.”⁷⁵ At the same time, other faith communities are concerned by what they perceive as efforts to privilege Christian discourse in the public sphere.

Law and Litigation

With a few exceptions, religious liberty litigation proceeded along largely familiar lines in 2025. Notable new developments included conflicts in the context of federal immigration policy and enforcement, and an attack in Washington State on the seal of the confessional.

Ongoing Litigation over Existing Regulations

While the Trump administration alleviated the threat of federal enforcement of various Biden-era regulations that infringed religious liberty, the administration did not formally rescind those regulations, so litigation against them continued. Early in 2025, two federal district courts vacated the U.S. Department of Education’s Title IX Rule, which had prohibited sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination on education programs receiving

71 Presidential Message on the Feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, 29 September 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/09/presidential-message-on-the-feast-of-saint-michael-the-archangel/; Presidential Message on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 2025: www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/12/presidential-message-on-the-feast-of-the-immaculate-conception/.

72 See, for example, Noah Hurowitz, *The Intercept*, “Official Propaganda for Caribbean Military Buildup Includes ‘Crusader Cross’,” 9 December 2025: theintercept.com/2025/12/09/crusader-cross-boat-strikes-propaganda-military/.

73 Madalaine Elhabbal, *Catholic News Association*, “‘Bring Jesus up!’: Sean Duffy rallies merchant marines over controversial painting move,” 10 April 2025: www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/263299/bring-jesus-up-sean-duffy-rallies-merchant-marines-over-controversial-painting-move.

74 Tim Busch, *National Catholic Register*, “The Trump Administration: More Catholic Than You Know,” 6 March 2025: www.ncregister.com/commentaries/trump-administration-catholic-christian-faith.

75 Ross Douthat, *New York Times*, “Why Is Christianity So Hard to Find in the Trump Administration?” 6 December 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/12/06/opinion/trump-hegseth-christian-nationalism.html?unlocked_article_code=1_F1A_YR_U.ZnUGF19Pd2oo&smid=url-share.

funding from the Department.⁷⁶ In October, another vacated the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Section 1557 Rule to the extent it prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender identity.⁷⁷ The USCCB and Catholic Benefits Association won injunctions against the abortion-accommodation mandate in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's regulations implementing the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act.⁷⁸

Remarkably, fourteen years after the Obama administration's HHS first issued regulations requiring employers to include contraceptives and abortifacients in their health plans—commonly known as the contraceptive mandate—litigation over the mandate carries on. In August, a federal district court struck down the exemptions from the mandate that the first Trump administration had established for religious and moral objections.⁷⁹

76 *Tennessee v. Cardona*, 762 F. Supp. 3d 615 (E.D. Ky. 2025), as amended (Jan. 10, 2025); *Carroll Indep. Sch. Dist. v. United States Dep't of Educ.*, No. 4:24-CV-00461-O, 2025 WL 1782572 (N.D. Tex. Feb. 19, 2025).

77 *Tennessee v. Kennedy*, No. 1:24CV161-LG-BWR, 2025 WL 2982069 (S.D. Miss. Oct. 22, 2025).

78 *U.S. Conf. of Cath. Bishops v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, No. 2:24-cv-00691-DCJ-TPL, slip op. at ___ (W.D. La. Sept. 3, 2025) (order granting preliminary injunction pending appeal); *Cath. Benefits Ass'n on behalf of Diocese v. Lucas*, No. 1:24-CV-00142, 2025 WL 1144768 (D.N.D. Apr. 15, 2025).

79 *Pennsylvania v. Trump*, 795 F. Supp. 3d 607 (E.D. Pa. 2025).

State Insurance Mandates

At the state level, mandates to cover abortion in employer health plans remained a source of concern. After the Supreme Court already granted, vacated, and remanded *Diocese of Albany v. Harris* back to the Second Circuit in 2021, for reconsideration in light of *Fulton v. Philadelphia*, the case reached the Court yet again and was granted, vacated, and remanded yet again, this time for reconsideration in light of *Catholic Charities Bureau v. Wisconsin Labor & Industry Review Commission*.⁸⁰ In Illinois, a state appeals court upheld a ruling find that the Illinois Baptist State Association suffered no burden on its religious liberty under Illinois' abortion mandate because the association had not exhausted its options to purchase a plan from out of state.⁸¹ And in Washington State, there was another development in *Cedar Park Assembly of God v. Kreidler*. On the case's first trip to the Ninth Circuit, the court reversed the district court's ruling that Cedar Park lacked standing. On its second trip, however, the Ninth Circuit changed its mind, ruling that Cedar Park did in fact lack standing. But in July, after Cedar Park petitioned for en banc review, the

80 *Roman Cath. Diocese of Albany v. Harris*, 145 S. Ct. 2794, 222 L. Ed. 2d 1084 (2025).

81 *Illinois Baptist State Ass'n v. Dep't of Ins.*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241282-U.

circuit panel withdrew its opinion. A new opinion is anticipated.⁸²

Intersections of Immigration and Religious Liberty

The Trump administration's immigration policies and enforcement efforts produced a number of religious liberty conflicts. As discussed in Section 4, ICE's rescission of a memorandum restricting enforcement at sensitive locations, such as churches and schools, generated several lawsuits. In Pennsylvania, an interfaith coalition led by the Society of Friends

(commonly known as the Quakers) won a preliminary injunction against ICE enforcement on their properties, while in D.C., a coalition led by the Mennonites appealed after being denied relief on the basis that they lack standing.⁸³ A third case in Oregon remains awaiting judgment.⁸⁴

The ICE detention facility in Broadview, Illinois generated controversy and a lawsuit over ICE officials' treatment of religiously motivated protestors and denial of requests to access the facility to attend

82 *Cedar Park Assembly of God of Kirkland, Washington v. Kuderer*, 146 F.4th 885 (9th Cir. 2025).

83 *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Religious Soc'y of Friends v. U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec.*, 767 F. Supp. 3d 293 (D. Md. 2025); *Mennonite Church USA v. U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec.*, 778 F. Supp. 3d 1 (D.D.C. 2025).

84 *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste v. Noem*, No. 6:25-cv-00699-AA, Compl. (D. Or. Apr. 28, 2025).



to the religious needs of detainees.⁸⁵

At the state level, Texas Attorney General Paxton's action to dissolve Annunciation House, a Catholic charity serving immigrants, was allowed to move forward when the Texas Supreme Court ruled that further proceedings would not violate the state's version of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.⁸⁶ However, AG Paxton's attempt to obtain a pre-suit deposition of the Executive Director of Catholic Charities, Rio Grande Valley was rejected by the Texas Court of Appeals.⁸⁷ And in Indiana, the state attorney general sought information from Catholic Charities of Fort Wayne—South Bend in an investigation into human trafficking and violations of anti-sanctuary laws.⁸⁸

In all these instances, there is a growing tension between the longstanding efforts of people of faith, and Catholics in particular, to serve and accompany immigrants and refugees, consistent with their

deeply held beliefs, and government actors' inconsistent approach to immigration policy. In the absence of long overdue reform of the U.S. immigration system by policymakers, religious organizations addressing people's spiritual and corporal needs without discriminating on the basis of immigration status become convenient scapegoats. Meanwhile, these very organizations, which have been essential in encouraging the successful integration of immigrants, helping combat their exploitation, and in the process supporting the development of American communities, somehow become the ones accused of acting against the national interest.

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⁸⁵ *Coalition for Spiritual & Public Leadership v. Noem*, No. ___, Compl. (N.D. Ill. Nov. 19, 2025).

⁸⁶ *Paxton v. Annunciation House*, No. 24-0573, 2025 WL 1536224 (Tex. May 30, 2025).

⁸⁷ *In re Office of the Attorney General of the State of Texas*, No. 15-24-00091-CV, 2025 WL ___, (Tex. App.—15th Dist. Aug. 4, 2025) (orig. proceeding) (mandamus denied).

⁸⁸ Bishop Kevin Rhoades and Dan Florin, *South Bend Tribune*, “Showing up with faith, compassion, despite distraction,” 3 December 2025: www.southbendtribune.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2025/12/03/showing-up-with-faith-compassion-despite-distraction-opinion/87571677007/.

Religion and Religious Exercise in Public Schools

Public schools remained a hotbed of litigation over conflicts between religion and gender ideology. One line of cases involves the parental rights of religious parents challenging school policies that conceal their children’s “social transitions.”⁸⁹ Another involves teachers and students who object to school policies requiring affirmation of students’ asserted gender identities, such as by using their preferred pronouns.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, lawsuits challenged requirements that the Ten Commandments be posted in public school classrooms in Arkansas,

Louisiana, and Texas.⁹¹ All three state laws were enjoined under *Stone v. Graham*, a 1980 Supreme Court case that struck down a similar Kentucky statute under the Establishment Clause because it had no “secular legislative purpose.” The states argue that that is no longer the correct test under the Court’s more recent Establishment Clause jurisprudence. Some challengers, in addition to their Establishment Clause claims, argue that forced exposure of children to the Ten Commandments violates their rights under the Free Exercise Clause. The en banc Fifth Circuit will hear the Texas and Louisiana cases together, while the Arkansas case remains in district court.

The Relationship of Religious Schools to the State

Both Maine and Colorado prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity as a condition for schools to receive state funds—in Maine, for a program that pays tuition at private schools for students in districts without public

⁸⁹ *Lee v. Poudre Sch. Dist. R-1*, No. 25-89, 2025 WL 2906469 (U.S. Oct. 14, 2025); *Doe No.1 v. Bethel Loc. Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ.*, No. 23-3740, 2025 WL 2453836 (6th Cir. Aug. 26, 2025); *Foote v. Ludlow Sch. Comm.*, 128 F.4th 336 (1st Cir. 2025).

⁹⁰ *Kluge v. Brownsburg Cnty. Sch. Corp.*, 150 F.4th 792 (7th Cir. 2025), *Defending Educ. v. Olentangy Loc. Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ.*, 158 F.4th 732 (6th Cir. 2025); *Theis v. Intermountain Educ. Serv. Bd. of Directors*, No. 2:25-CV-00865-HL, 2025 WL 2406871 (D. Or. Aug. 20, 2025)

⁹¹ *Roake v. Brumley*, 141 F.4th 614 (5th Cir.), reh’g en banc granted, opinion vacated, 154 F.4th 329 (5th Cir. 2025); *Nathan v. Alamo Heights Indep.*, 795 F. Supp. 3d 910 (W.D. Tex.), hearing en banc ordered sub nom. *Nathan v. Alamo Heights Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 157 F.4th 713 (5th Cir. 2025); *Stinson v. Fayetteville Sch. Dist. No. 1*, No. 5:25-CV-5127, 2025 WL 2619159 (W.D. Ark. Sept. 10, 2025).

schools, and in Colorado, for schools to participate in the state's universal pre-kindergarten program. In each state, a Catholic school represented by the Becket Fund and a Protestant school represented by Alliance Defending Freedom challenged the states' exclusion of schools that adhere to true beliefs on human sexuality—St. Dominic Academy and Crosspoint Church in Maine, and St. Mary's School and Darren Patterson Christian Academy in Colorado.⁹²

The Maine cases follow on the state's loss in *Carson v. Makin*, where the Supreme Court struck down the state's exclusion of religious schools that use state funds to teach religion. The state responded to the loss by imposing the nondiscrimination requirement as another means of excluding disfavored religious schools. The cases were argued together at the First Circuit in early 2025 and still await a ruling.

The Tenth Circuit upheld Colorado's law in *St. Mary's v. Roy*, reasoning that it passes the test set out in *Employment Division v. Smith*.⁹³ The case is now pending certiorari before the Supreme Court. *Darren Christian Patterson Academy v. Roy* still awaits a ruling from the Tenth Circuit.

⁹² *St. Dominic Acad. v. Makin*, 744 F. Supp. 3d 43 (D. Me. 2024); *Crosspoint Church v. Makin*, No. 1:23-CV-00146-JAW, 2024 WL 2830931 (D. Me. June 4, 2024); *St. Mary Cath. Par. in Littleton v. Roy*, 154 F.4th 752 (10th Cir. 2025); *Darren Patterson Christian Acad. v. Roy*, 765 F. Supp. 3d 1194 (D. Colo. 2025).

⁹³ *St. Mary Cath. Parish*, 154 F.4th at 775 (2025).

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Attack on the Seal of the Confessional

Washington State's law on mandatory reporting of child abuse exempts covered persons from reporting abuse in certain situations where they received the information in a legally privileged setting, such as the attorney-client privilege. In 2025, the state amended its law to specifically eliminate the privilege for clergy who receive such information in the context of confession, while leaving other forms of privilege intact. Finding that the law likely violates the Free Exercise Clause, a federal district court issued a preliminary injunction prohibiting enforcement of the law against Catholic priests in the state. “[T]he text of the bill and its legislative history,” wrote the court, “arguably evince the intentional abrogation of a practice that the legislature understood

to be religiously sacrosanct.”⁹⁴ The state then folded, agreeing to enter a permanent injunction against enforcement of the law as to the Catholic sacrament of Confession or other such practice in other faiths.⁹⁵

Church Autonomy in the Spotlight

The church autonomy doctrine—a principle, deriving from both the Free Exercise and the Establishment Clauses, that civil authorities may not decide matters of a church’s faith, governance, or internal discipline—has increasingly figured in religious liberty litigation in recent years. For instance, at the Supreme Court, Justice Thomas’s concurrence in *Catholic Charities Bureau* argued that the Wisconsin Supreme Court violated the church autonomy doctrine by disregarding the Diocese of Superior’s religious understanding of its own internal structure—an “error of treating a religious institution as nothing more than its corporate entities.” And in 2025, the doctrine received likely its most full-throated articulation from a Court of Appeals yet, in *McRaney v.*

⁹⁴ *Etienne v. Ferguson*, 791 F. Supp. 3d 1226, 1246 (W.D. Wash. 2025); *see also Orthodox Church in America v. Ferguson*, No. 2:25-cv-00209-RLP, slip op. (E.D. Wash. July 25, 2025) (order granting stipulated preliminary injunction).

⁹⁵ *Etienne v. Ferguson*, No. 3:25-cv-05461-DGE, slip op. (W.D. Wash. July 15, 2025) (order granting stipulated motion to enter preliminary injunction and stay proceedings).

North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. “Where the church autonomy doctrine applies, its protection is total,” wrote the court. “That is because the doctrine is a constitutional immunity from suit.... Abridgement of the church autonomy immunity imposes irreparable injury on the religious organization, so its denial is subject to an immediate interlocutory appeal.”⁹⁶

The church autonomy doctrine—a principle, deriving from both the Free Exercise and the Establishment Clauses, that civil authorities may not decide matters of a church’s faith, governance, or internal discipline—has increasingly figured in religious liberty litigation in recent years.

Not every court saw it that way. In *O’Connell v. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, a class-action lawsuit alleging the USCCB is liable

⁹⁶ *McRaney v. N. Am. Mission Bd. of the S. Baptist Convention, Inc.*, 157 F.4th 627, 641 (5th Cir. 2025); *see also Union Gospel Mission of Yakima v. Brown*, 162 F.4th 1190, 1201-08 (9th Cir. 2026) (applying church autonomy doctrine to protect religiously motivated hiring decisions by religious employers).

for fraud because the Holy See used some funds offered to Peter's Pence for investments and operating the Church rather than immediately using them for certain charitable matters, a panel of the D.C. Circuit denied the USCCB's interlocutory appeal over the suit's intrusion into church autonomy.⁹⁷ Judges Rao and Walker warned that their Circuit's conclusion threatened irreparable harm to the First Amendment and would render church autonomy a "dead letter."⁹⁸ By contrast, in *Huntsman v. Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, the en banc Ninth Circuit unanimously rejected similar fraudulent-tithing claims. While ten judges found the claims failed on their face, five explained in two concurrences that the claims also obviously violated the church autonomy doctrine: "Nothing says 'entanglement with religion' more than Huntsman's apparent position that the head of a religious faith should have spoken with greater precision about inherently religious topics, lest the Church be found liable for fraud."⁹⁹ And in *Gaddy v. Corporation of the President of the*

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Tenth Circuit also rejected fraudulent-tithing claims, in part under the church autonomy doctrine.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *O'Connell v. United States Conf. of Cath. Bishops*, 134 F.4th 1243 (D.C. Cir. 2025) (reh'g en banc denied).

⁹⁸ *O'Connell v. United States Conf. of Catholic Bishops*, No. 23-7173, 2025 WL 3082728, at *1-2, *6-17 (D.C. Cir. Nov. 4, 2025) (Rao, J., dissenting, and Walker, J., concurring).

⁹⁹ *Huntsman v. Corp. of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 127 F.4th 784, 798 (9th Cir. 2025) (Bress, J., concurring); see also id. at 812-14 (Bumatay, J., concurring).

¹⁰⁰ *Gaddy v. Corp. of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 148 F.4th 1202, 1211-16 (10th Cir. 2025).

Section VII:

Areas of Critical Concern, Challenges and Opportunities



In 2026, as the United States celebrates its Semiquincentennial, many of the religious liberty issues that were in play in 2025 will likely persist. President Trump was elected on the promise of mass deportations of illegal immigrants, and his administration's immigration enforcement activities are expected to continue. Catholic teaching recognizes that nations have a right to control their borders and

to enforce valid laws. At the same time, the Christian faith teaches that every human person is created in the image of God and has inherent dignity. The U.S. bishops have been united in their support for the rights of immigrants and for every person to be treated with the respect their God-given dignity demands, regardless of immigration status. In a special pastoral message on November 12, the U.S. bishops criticized the vilification of immigrants and threats against the sanctity of houses of worship and the special nature of hospitals and schools in the course of immigration enforcement.¹⁰¹

Within and beyond the Catholic Church, there are reasonable disagreements in our country about how to enforce immigration law. Some

101 USCCB News Release: U.S. Bishops Issue a "Special Message" on Immigration from Plenary Assembly in Baltimore, 12 November 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/us-bishops-issue-special-message-immigration-plenary-assembly-baltimore.

surveys have suggested that Catholics who regularly attend Mass support greater restrictions on immigration and more extensive enforcement, with some in the Catholic commentariat pointing to a gap between the bishops and the laity on the issue.¹⁰² Other surveys, however, demonstrate a more nuanced view of immigration among the Catholic faithful, with a significant percentage affirming its net benefits and a moral duty to welcome immigrants. The bishops themselves have recognized that nations have a responsibility to regulate their borders and establish a just and orderly immigration system for the sake of the common good.¹⁰³ Regardless of one's view over the best ways to regulate immigration, there should be basic agreement about the rights of communities to be able to worship without fear and of immigration detainees to have access to the sacraments and pastoral care.

Political polarization has long been a concern to the U.S. Catholic bishops. As Bishop Kevin Rhoades, former

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chair of the Committee for Religious Liberty, said in 2024, our problems with polarization stem from our post-truth politics.¹⁰⁴ Political leaders and media voices make baseless assertions with no evidence and no accountability, and news consumers accept them when those assertions support the favored narrative. The idea that politics might be an arena in which citizens seek truth together, even if they do so in an adversarial way, seems quaint. While the American Semiquincentennial could offer an opportunity to look to the nation's founding for common ground, it seems likely that, given the polarized interpretations of American history, the celebration itself will be occasion for national divisions to deepen

102 Tyler Arnold, *National Catholic Register*, "EWTN News Poll: Most Catholic Voters Support Trump, Deportations Despite Bishops' Concern," 11 December 2025: www.ncregister.com/cna/ewtn-news-poll-most-catholic-voters-support-trump-deportations.

103 Mark M. Gray & Thomas P. Gaunt, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "U.S. Catholics' Attitudes about Immigration, Migrants, and Refugees," June 2024: static1.squarespace.com/static/629c7d00b-33f845b6435b6ab/t/667c79aaf0d-6b004371ab208/1719433643088/ImmigrationReport.pdf.

104 Bishop Kevin Rhoades, *OSV News*, Depolarizing religious liberty, 7 August 2025: www.osvnews.com/depolarizing-religious-liberty/.

further. Sadly, these political divisions have the potential to break out into violence.

Reflections on early American history often note the central role that pursuit of religious freedom—specifically, in some cases, a desire for ecclesial independence from the state—played in our nation’s founding. It is fitting, then, that the year of our Semiquincentennial will feature a test of whether the Constitution’s promise of church autonomy will be honored. The Supreme Court will soon decide whether to correct the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals’ decision in *O’Connell v. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops*, where the dissent warned that “if the mere invocation of neutral principles permits a court to interfere with church autonomy, then the constitutional protection is a dead letter”—indeed, the protection is so important that it must be resolved at the threshold of the litigation.¹⁰⁵

A development over the past several years that is likely to persist in 2026 is the mainstreaming of antisemitic ideas and rhetoric across the political spectrum. In some cases, antisemitic language and action have occasionally seeped into opposition to Israeli policies. In other cases, rank antisemitic images and speech have seen wide circulation in podcasts and social media accounts. Religious

liberty advocates can expect these trends to continue.

Challenges

Political and Anti-Religious Violence

In recent years, the USCCB has expressed concern about politically motivated violence. The polarization that has long been the subject of commentary by religious leaders appears to be devolving into a cycle of attack and retribution. Efforts to address the growing rancor in American political culture have failed to match the forces influencing people to cultivate political and tribal identities defined, in part, by their hatred for others. Some of the recent acts of violence have manifested this sort of hatred. Others seem to point toward a kind of nihilism that is celebrated in some online spaces.

Trends in political discourse can shift from one year to the next. However, the culture and structures fostering today’s discourse remain in place. Therefore, in 2026, the Committee for Religious Liberty continues to be concerned about politically and religiously motivated violence.

How to Respond

Polarization is not simply a phenomenon “out there.” It names a tendency within many people to turn away from truth in order to remain

105 *O’Connell v. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, No. 23-7173, 2025 WL 3082728, at *7 (D.C. Cir. Nov. 4, 2025) (Rao, J., dissenting).



loyal to their political tribe. But Catholics are called to be conformed to Christ, not to partisan political leaders, media personalities, and social media influencers. Catholics can take a step towards de-polarizing our nation's politics by honestly undertaking an examination of conscience (www.usccb.org/resources/civilize-it-examination-conscience-examen-de-conciencia) and availing themselves of the sacrament of Confession. Catholics upon reflection may ask themselves, "Have I spoken untruthfully in order to defeat a political opponent in an argument? Have I failed to treat others with genuine charity? Have I remained culpably ignorant about an issue by refusing to listen to others?" When we come before the Lord in Confession, God's grace heals us as individuals and as members of the body of Christ.

Unjust Terms and Conditions on Federal Grants and Unreliability of Government

The Trump administration has shown signs of a desire to work with religious groups to promote the common good. At the same time, some of the administration's priorities have put religious organizations in a difficult position. The administration made an unexplained decision to suspend funding for federal refugee assistance programs, which led the USCCB to file a lawsuit against the government and ultimately to end

its refugee resettlement program.¹⁰⁶ The Department of Homeland Security issued new terms and conditions for their grants, which states that grant recipients must cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, cannot serve undocumented immigrants, and cannot operate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs.¹⁰⁷ These terms and conditions could mean that a church that operates a food pantry would not be eligible for disaster relief grants from FEMA if some of the needy people who received food from the ministry were undocumented.

Of particular concern is how these terms and conditions apply to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP), which provides funding for houses of worship and religious schools to increase the security on their physical plants. In view of the Attorney General's July 29 memo, "Guidance for Recipients of Federal Funding Regarding Unlawful Discrimination," it appears that, for example, a parochial school that offers

scholarships to racial minorities would be disqualified from participating in the NSGP. The terms are unclear and have been a cause for confusion among faith-based organizations that could benefit from these programs.

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The content of the new terms and conditions is problematic in itself, but the way the changes were made also raises concerns about capriciousness.¹⁰⁸ When a church, school, or faith-based program seeks to work with the government, it is depending on a certain level of reliability and transparency. The changes that have been made with some grant programs thus far have been poorly communicated and seemingly ad hoc, with little explanation offered for the rationale behind the changes. If this problem persists, it will prove to be a

106 USCCB News Release: USCCB Files Lawsuit on Unlawful Suspension of U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, 19 February 2025: www.usccb.org/news/2025/usccb-files-lawsuit-unlawful-suspension-us-refugee-admissions-program.

107 Emily Wilder, *Jewish Currents*, "A Federal Security Grant Program Popular with Jewish Organizations May Now Require Beneficiaries to Cooperate with ICE," 22 August 2025: jewishcurrents.org/a-federal-security-grant-program-popular-with-jewish-organizations-may-now-require-beneficiaries-to-cooperate-with-ice.

108 See also Yuval Levin, *The Free Press*, "America the Unreliable," 22 May 2025: [www.aei.org/op-eds/america-the-unreliable/](http://aei.org/op-eds/america-the-unreliable/).

threat to the ability of the faith-based organizations to partner with the government to promote the common good.

How to Respond

Religious charities and social service providers have had their capacity to serve reduced by the loss of government funds. Even if new funding opportunities arise, there is a strong possibility that faith-based organizations will be reluctant to partner with the federal government.

work of Catholic Relief Services at www.crs.org/ or your local Catholic Charities at www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/about-us/find-a-local-agency/, and consider how you might do more to support these institutions.

Immigration: Access to Sacraments, Sensitive Locations

President Trump campaigned on a promise to carry out mass deportations of immigrants, and in his first year in office, his administration has made immigration enforcement a priority.



In order for the Church to continue serve the common good, it will be incumbent upon lay Catholics to do their part to support these works of the Church. Learn more about the

The actions of the administration in this area have affected people of faith in two key ways: fear of participating in worship due to the administration's change in policy for enforcement at

so-called sensitive locations (otherwise known as “protected areas”), and access to religious services in detention centers. Some dioceses have taken the extraordinary step of dispensing the faithful from their Sunday obligation if they feel that going to Mass exposes them to risk of detention. Detainees have, at times, found their access to the sacraments and pastoral care unnecessarily inhibited. As new immigration operations begin, and new detention centers are erected, these kinds of threats will persist. While Catholics may disagree among themselves over how best to manage immigration, we should all agree that fundamental rights, including for noncitizens, warrant respect.

How to Respond

In 2025, the USCCB launched *The Cabrini Pledge* (www.usccb.org/cabrinipledge) as both a reminder of our immigrant heritage and a call to deeper engagement with the Catholic faith in response to current events. At a time when our culture is dominated by deep political divisions and staunch disagreements about immigration policy, moving forward can feel impossible, even hopeless. But this effort, inspired by Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini—the first American citizen to be canonized and herself an Italian immigrant to this country—is a reminder that we are each called to be keepers of hope.

More recently, the USCCB also announced the *You Are Not Alone* initiative (justiceforimmigrants.org/you-are-not-alone/). This national effort of the U.S. Catholic Church, rooted in the belief that every person is created in God’s image, exists to promote hope, compassion, and practical support to immigrants across the United States. It shares practical opportunities for Catholics and others of good will to accompany our brothers and sisters in need, following the model and teachings of Christ, while respecting the principal of subsidiarity.

Opportunities

Federal Scholarship Tax Credit

The Annual Report for 2024 identified parental choice in education as a critical opportunity for religious freedom. This issue has long been a priority for the Catholic Church, which teaches that parents have the right to educate their children in accordance with their faith, and that the government ought to ensure that parents can make an authentically free choice. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act included a Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC), which allows donors to receive tax credits for gifts to scholarship granting organizations (SGO). The FSTC promotes parental choice by encouraging donations to SGOs, which in turn grant scholarships that families can use to choose the school that is best for them.

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Unfortunately, the FSTC passed without religious freedom protections. Such protections would have helped prevent states from discriminating against SGOs that give scholarships that can be used in religious schools. The regulatory framework implementing the FSTC will be developed by the Department of Treasury. The regulations are expected to be issued in 2026. Treasury Regulations that protect the use of scholarships for religious education and the integrity of faith-based SGOs would prove to be a significant moment in the history of parental and school choice advocacy.

How to Respond

The USCCB actively engages in the rulemaking process, and the voice of advocates can make a difference. USCCB advocates have submitted significant numbers of comments in previous campaigns, and they helped. As the administration considers how to

implement the FSTC, the USCCB will advocate to ensure that the rules protect the use of scholarships for religious schools. Sign up to receive alerts at www.votervoice.net/USCCB/register and make your voice heard.

Repeal of Discriminatory Provisions

Religious liberty ensures that people of faith can fully participate in the life of the political community. When a government creates programs that aim to serve the common good in some way, religious organizations ought to have the opportunity to participate in those programs. Unfortunately, many governments have included legislative provisions that bar religious organizations from participating in public programs, or bar the use of public funds for religious activities. The time is ripe to cancel those provisions, many of which echo the anti-Catholicism of the Blaine Amendments of the late nineteenth century.

In recent decisions, the Supreme Court has indicated that governments cannot discriminate against religious organizations simply because they are religious. Moreover, early in his second term, President Trump signed an executive order requiring agencies to ensure that all rules are in compliance with *Carson v. Makin*. In the coming year, religious freedom would receive a significant boost if legislation were passed that repealed the discriminatory provisions that remain in federal statutes.

How to Respond?

Learn more about federal and state laws that discriminate against religious conduct in government programs at www.religiousequality.net. This coalition of religious liberty advocates has developed this tool to help researchers, advocates, and policymakers identify laws that still violate the bedrock rule that discrimination against religious institutions violates the First Amendment. It documents laws that deny religious believers or religious organizations the right to participate in public programs, and which may be unconstitutional as a result.

Further Repudiation of Gender Ideology

As last year's Annual Report stated, "gender ideology has corroded religious liberty in recent years." However, more recently, gender ideology has suffered significant setbacks, such as the decision in the Skrmetti case and the result of the 2024 presidential election. In 2026, the Supreme Court will decide three cases that could indicate further defeat for gender ideology. The consolidated cases of *Little v. Hecox* and *West Virginia v. B.P.J.* present to the Court the question of whether states can continue to reserve women's sports to women. A judgment in favor of the states would help to arrest the progress of the movement to insinuate gender ideology in law and thus reduce the likelihood of scenarios in which

religious organizations must defend their recognition of sexual difference. It may also answer whether Title IX can continue to be used to impose gender ideology on religious organizations. The case of *Chiles v. Salazar* will decide whether counselors have a First Amendment right to engage in speech with their minor clients that respects Church teaching in the area of human sexuality.

How to Respond?

While legal actions might be helpful in pushing back gender ideology, it is crucial that Christians evangelize the culture. As Pope Francis put it, "[T]oday the worst danger is gender ideology, which cancels out differences. I asked for studies to be made on this ugly ideology of our time, which erases differences and makes everything the same; to erase difference is to erase humanity."¹⁰⁹ The USCCB's "Love Means More" provides resources for talking through difficult issues related to sexuality. Love Means More aims to help anyone, Catholics and non-Catholics, think more clearly about the complex web of issues surrounding what it means to love. Learn more at lovemeansmore.org/.

¹⁰⁹ Pope Francis, To participants in the International Conference 'Man-Woman: Image of God. Towards an Anthropology of Vocations', 1 March 2024: www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/march/documents/20240301-convegno-uomo-donna.html.