A Thorn in Cardinal Dolan’s Side: A Call for Sanctuary in Catholic Churches

By Joe Parziale

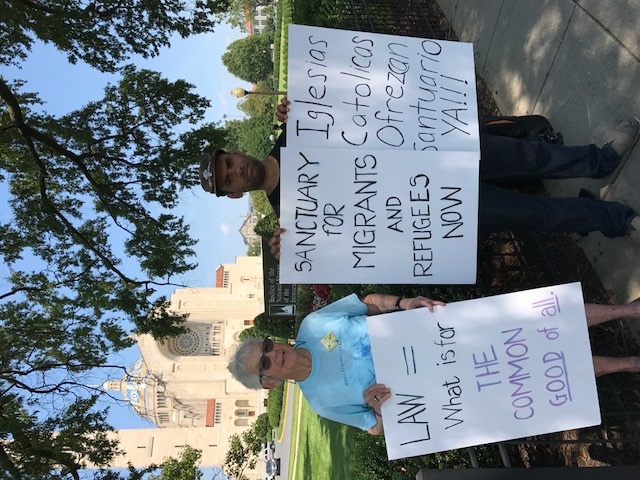


Photo by Janice Sevre-Duszynska

On a sweltering, soggy day in mid-August, Felix Cepeda sat at the end of his chair outside Holyrood Episcopal Church in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, donning a black t-shirt with an imprint of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X shaking hands. Two days earlier, just inside the church, a woman from Guatemala named Amanda Morales became the first undocumented immigrant in New York City to publicly announce that she’d be taking sanctuary from deportation inside a house of worship. Morales’ plight prompted Cepeda, 36, to reflect on his often-solitary existence as a full-time Catholic activist and former Jesuit brother with limited financial support and no formal ties to any organizing base.

“I could never feel what Amanda is going through,” he said, sitting back again, as if preparing to follow his introspection with some comic relief. “But at least it gives me more proximity to feel a little bit of poverty. As Jesuits or priests, everything is pretty much taken care of. A lot of the priests in New York have housekeepers. Come on. You’re a celibate man. Make yourself a sandwich.”

Since Donald Trump won the 2016 election on a platform that featured as a centerpiece severe immigration controls and mass deportations, some 400 places of worship nationwide have declared their doors open to undocumented immigrants, according to a coalition of religious groups advocating for refugee assistance. Church World Service said the spike in the number of so-called “sanctuary churches” has brought the total number to roughly 800, though verifiable figures remain unclear. Catholic Churches make up only a tiny fraction of declared sanctuary churches, and in New York the figure is zero. For months, Cepeda – who was born to Dominican immigrants, including an undocumented father – has been waging a mostly one-man battle to change that, pressuring the Archdiocese of New York with fasts and vigils and calling on local progressive Catholic institutions to take a stronger stance. He said he doesn’t want to detract from the “great work” the Church does through networks like Catholic Charities, but added that it ought to reflect on basic Christian teaching and question whether that work is sufficient.

“The problem is, the Church provides charity and social services and thinks, ‘Well, we did our share,’” Cepeda said, talking out of the left side of his mouth with a slight smile. “We tend to pat ourselves on the back when we give bread to the homeless, but we’re following someone who was nailed to a cross. We need to do way more.”

For one thing, as Cepeda points out, the failure to offer sanctuary poses a practical problem for the Church. Forty-two percent of U.S. Catholics are immigrants or children of immigrants, according to a 2014 Pew Research study, compared to 25% of adults overall. Most of those immigrants are from Latin America, and Hispanics make up 34% of the total U.S. Catholic population. Many of them are undocumented.

“There are a lot of Catholics who are taking refuge in Anglican churches, Lutheran churches,” Cepeda said. “And I have a problem with that. I’m calling for the Church to offer sanctuary, and it’s not just for Catholics, it’s for anyone who needs it. But it is kind of a paradox that they have to go to other churches when their own Church has so much money, so much property.”

Indeed, the Church – one of the world’s largest landowners – owns scores of choice pieces of real estate in New York, many of them unused. And it has become notorious in recent years for high-price sell-offs to luxury developers. Just last fall, for example, the archdiocese sold the Church of St. Vincent DePaul and two other parcels in Chelsea for some $50 million to a hotelier. A dozen church properties were deconsecrated this summer, and one is already due to be sold to another private developer for more than $7 million.

Cepeda penned a letter to Cardinal Timothy Dolan in April to suggest repurposing the buildings as homeless shelters, organizing centers – and as sanctuary spaces for the undocumented. No one in the archdiocese wrote him back.

“These buildings can literally become places where we can pray, act and think about justice,” Cepeda said. “These are buildings that were built by immigrants, by poor immigrants mostly, and we’re just going to raze them so we can sell them to developers to make condos? I think that’s a shame.”

And though he never received a direct response, it’s clear the Church has taken notice.

After Cepeda began receiving some media attention for fasts he’d been holding in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in May, Catholic Charities put out a series of statements avowing unceasing support for immigrants. "The parishes, schools, and the charitable agencies of the Archdiocese have been welcoming immigrants to the United States for more than 200 years,” Catholic Charities said in a statement to NBC News. It pointed to its provision of services like English classes, legal representation and an emergency-assistance hotline set up for immigrants. The archdiocese did not respond to The Flood’s request for comment on the sanctuary issue.

But Cepeda countered that it’s telling on two levels that Catholic Charities released the statement instead of the Archdiocese of New York. First, he said, the statement amounted to an evasion: it was the archdiocese to whom he had appealed, specifically the office of Cardinal Dolan, which stands alone in speaking for the archdiocese and its views. Second, it buttresses one of Cepeda’s principal criticisms: that the Church carries out many charitable works to help the oppressed, but little to challenge sources of oppression.

Just days after our meeting at Holyrood, Cepeda traveled to Washington to stage a hunger strike outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, which serves the influential U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He took with him an elderly nun and a woman from the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP), a group which has, for practical purposes, been excommunicated after Pope Benedict XVI in a 2007 decree censured the women *latae sententiae* along with the Bishops who ordain them. The conference apparently got wind in advance of the trio’s visit, and the police were quickly called. All three were barred from entering the basilica grounds for five years, and told they would face arrest if they did. They returned the next day (none were arrested).

Cepeda is, of course, no stranger to making the Catholic authorities uncomfortable. He was a Jesuit brother in the Dominican Republic for seven years before being removed from his order because of his advocacy for ordaining women priests. He said he had been getting under the skin of his brothers for years, but the flashpoint came when the Archbishop of Santo Domingo spotted t-shirts he had made up, reading “Ordain Women Priests” in Spanish. The brothers confronted him and wasted little time in asking him to leave.

“It’s like your family kicking you out,” Cepeda said. “And especially seeing that other people were doing really horrendous things, including raping kids, and they need to be treated with mercy and patience. Being a troublemaker is fun sometimes, and I’m glad I did it, but it hurt.”

On the sanctuary issue, the firebrand activist finds himself mostly alone again. Cepeda said many of his friends are activists in the Church who are currently paid salaries and stipends by the archdiocese, and wouldn’t want to threaten the work they’re doing by criticizing Cardinal Dolan. He said he tried to engage progressive Catholic communities like the Catholic Worker and Benincasa, but that those groups, which also have ties to members of the clergy, showed little interest.

“You have to understand as a Christian that there are moments where you’re called to be by yourself,” said Cepeda, again becoming reflective. “I wish God spoke to me. But we can only talk to each other, and that’s harder. I don’t know if I’m doing God’s will through the hunger strike. I’m discerning, too. But I do think there comes a point where you have to stop discerning and just take action.”

Behind the main worship hall at Holyrood, in the rectory library, the full, green eyes of 33-year-old Amanda Morales – who Cepeda called his “shero” – betrayed fatigue following several days of chaos and uncertainty, exacerbated by a barrage of media interviews. Behind her, her three children, ages 9, 8 and 2, were playing on the floor of their new room.

Morales does not comport with the image of the “really bad dudes” the Trump administration purports to be repatriating. (Even the administration’s own policy guidelines on deportations released in February, which give Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) broad latitude to deport those convicted of petty crimes and even those simply *charged* with crimes, don’t cohere with Trump’s rhetoric.) Soft-spoken and unassuming, Morales discussed nearly everything through the lens of how it affected her children. She entered the country in 2004 fleeing violence, including threats to her immediate family, and extreme poverty. She was apprehended at the border and ICE issued an order for her removal, though she wasn’t immediately deported. In 2012, she was in a traffic accident and when police demanded identification, she showed them her Guatemalan passport. That is the comprehensive list of her perceived transgressions, and she had never missed an appointment with the agency. But ICE, given carte blanche to essentially deport at will, found it sufficient to remove her.

In July, Morales was ordered to purchase one-way tickets to Guatemala for her and her three children – all U.S. citizens who would have had no choice but to accompany her, since she’s their sole legal guardian – and come back early the next month. She bought one, but since it wasn’t a direct flight, ICE rejected it and told her to buy a second ticket and return to the agency. Since several immigration lawyers told her she had little recourse, she said, she asked a friend to Google how to find a church that might house her. She found Holyrood through the New Sanctuary Coalition, an interfaith network of faith leaders and places of worship. She said living in sanctuary and watching over her shoulder for ICE will disrupt her family’s life, but that – given the circumstances – she’s glad to call Holyrood her new home.

“It's going to be hard to be locked in here, but I feel that I'm protected,” Morales said in Spanish. “There is peace here. They appreciate me. Everyone is in solidarity.”

Morales acknowledges she took a great risk in publicizing her whereabouts. While a 2011 agency memo dictates that ICE agents need high-level authorization (with some broad exceptions, including “national security” matters) to carry out raids in places of worship, schools and other “sensitive locations,” that memo is not legally binding and leaves room for interpretation. And if she leaves the church at all, the courtesy is nullified. But Morales said announcing that she was taking sanctuary was the only way to bring attention to her cause and boost her chances of finding a lawyer who can help her. She said she’d encourage anyone facing a similar plight to do the same.

“To them, I’d say with God it's possible to move forward,” Morales said. “Don't give up. Don't run away. It’s better to stay and confront justice.”

Of course, civil disobedience has deep roots in the Christian tradition, from St. Paul and St. Augustine to the Civil Rights Movement. Holyrood’s priest, Rev. Luis Barrios said he was simply advancing that tradition.

“I don’t care how much power [ICE] has or the legality of [Morales’ removal],” Barrios told reporters after announcing Morales would be taking sanctuary in his church. Then, channeling Augustine: “When the law is immoral, you have a divine obligation to break the law.”

Cepeda said he takes deep personal inspiration from people like Morales, and that the Catholic Church is missing out on an opportunity by not doing more to embrace and learn from undocumented immigrants. One thing such an approach could do, he said, is force Church leadership to look in the mirror – literally.

“Look at Charlottesville,” he said. “There are a lot of Catholics thinking and talking about racism in the Church. And that got me thinking that maybe this is connected to sanctuary, too. If Church leaders looked more like [Latinx peoples’] moms or their nieces and nephews, would they take so long to help? I think the bishops should also pray and think about that.”

As for his own future in the Church, Cepeda said that in spite of all his criticisms, the clergy is going to have a hard time getting rid of him.

“There have been so many amazing bishops, popes, nuns,” he said. “I’m still a Catholic because of them. Especially poor Catholics, oppressed Catholics. They believe in this institution. They believe in a God of justice. I think there’s hope for it, that we can do better.”

With a grin, he added: “Someone needs to stay.”

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