

A betrayal of refuge

In immigrant congregations, deportation anxiety can silence survivors and shield abusers.

by [AHyun Lee](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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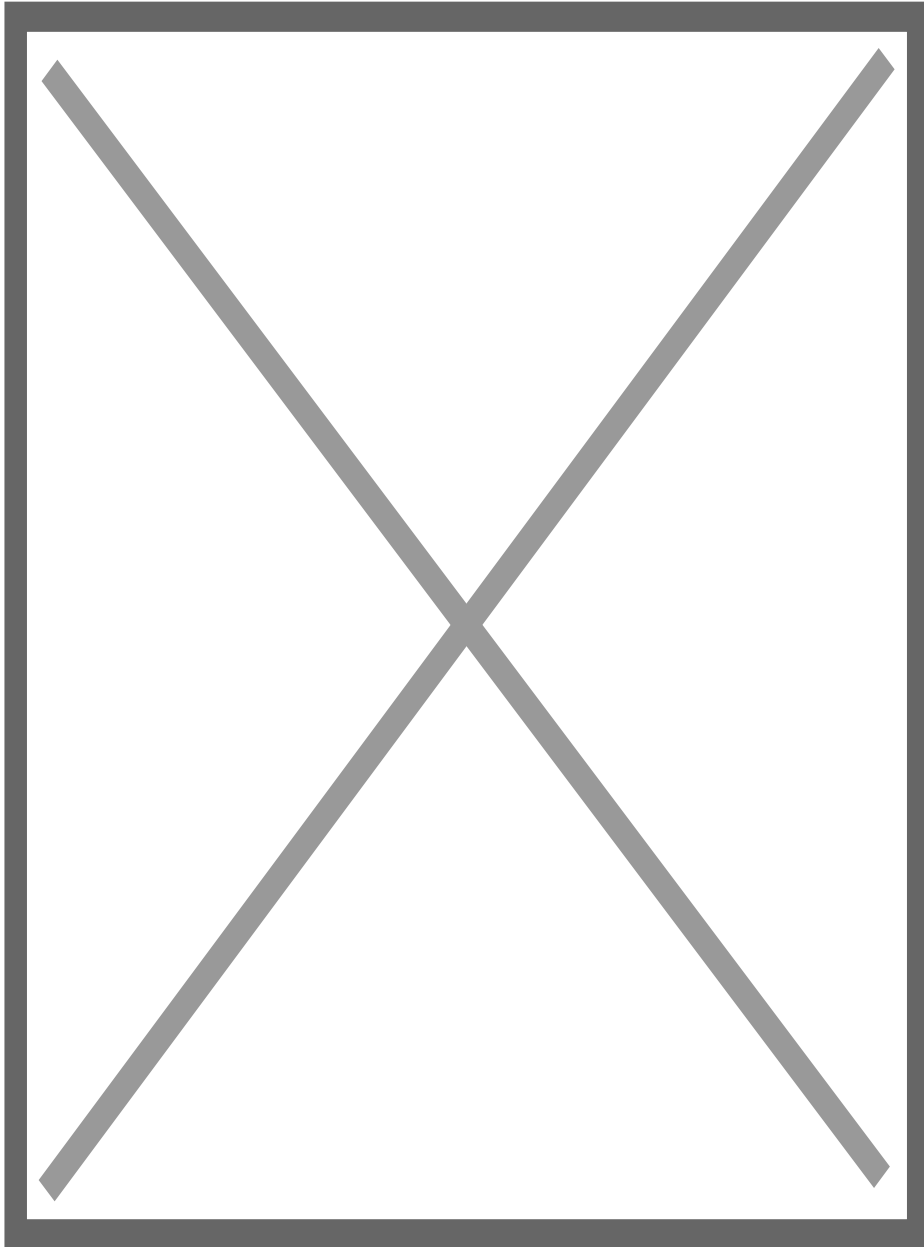


Illustration by Vanessa Saba

When clergy sexual abuse occurs, the underlying dynamics are often quite similar: There is a convergence of the abuser's authority, the vulnerability of the abuser's target, and the religious institution's instinct for self-

protection and risk management. The case of Peter E. Garcia in Los Angeles starkly demonstrates these dynamics. According to Archdiocese of Los Angeles records reported and summarized in the *Los Angeles Times*, the priest told therapists he had molested boys “on and off” since his ordination in 1966, and the church attributed as many as 20 victims to him.

Many of these victims were undocumented immigrants from Mexico, and Garcia assured archdiocesan officials that they would not go to the authorities. He died in 2009 without being prosecuted.

I cite this case not because it is typical but because it is brutally clarifying. It shows how deportability can become a tool of coercion, a person’s immigration precarity weaponized to secure their silence. It also shows how institutional responses can quietly align with that coercion when leaders assume, or even bank on, the likelihood that undocumented families will not report. When clergy sexual abuse happens under these conditions, the injury is not only sexual violence—it is a betrayal of refuge. The church, meant to be a sanctuary of protection, becomes a site of threat.

Imagine being a teenager in an immigrant congregation, trying to decide whether to tell anyone what a trusted clergy leader did. In one direction lies a familiar fear: *No one will believe me. I will be blamed. The church will doubt what I say—or close ranks to protect its own.* But alongside that concern there is a harsher calculation: *If I tell, will my family be exposed? Will someone call immigration? Will my parents lose their jobs? Will someone get detained? Will we be separated?* As a Korean immigrant and a pastoral theologian and clinician, I’ve heard this calculation whispered in churches.

That second fear is not theoretical. It is manufactured—and intensified—by an enforcement climate that makes visibility feel dangerous. Scaled-up fear doesn’t stay neatly “political.” It enters the intimate corners of communal life. The Trump administration’s immigration rhetoric and enforcement posture amplify the very conditions that make clergy sexual abuse more likely and harder to expose: concentrated power, deportability-driven fear, and institutional self-protection that transforms disclosure into a threat instead of a path to safety.

Clergy sexual abuse is not just about individual abusers. It is about ecosystems—settings in which authority is amplified, dependency is real, and accountability is fragile. In immigrant communities, the church often functions as a cultural home and practical safety net. This is why it can be profoundly life-giving. But it can become dangerous when clergy power is not bounded—and it can wield state terror when it’s trying to cover up abuse.

Psychological and trauma research offers language for what many communities already know in their bones. Jennifer M. Gómez uses the phrase “cultural betrayal trauma” to name an intensified harm that victim-survivors suffer when violence comes from within a community people rely on for belonging and protection. Betrayal scholars call this institutional betrayal: when an essential organization responds with minimization, delay, retaliation, or reputational management. In immigrant settings, both concepts are braided with deportability: The ever-present possibility of detention or removal disciplines daily life and shapes what feels safe to say out loud. When people feel surveilled and disposable, predators gain leverage, and institutions find it easier to keep problems “inside.”

We don’t have to guess what heightened deportation fear does to the reporting of sexual violence. In 2017, the Los Angeles Police Department warned that rape reports among Hispanics dropped 25 percent, a change officials linked to deportation fears. Houston’s police chief reported a 43 percent drop and tied it to immigration fear and rhetoric. If enforcement fear chills reporting to police, it also chills disclosure to pastors, bishops, and denominational systems—because any sort of official process can feel like exposure that could endanger a family and the community. Predators exploit this. Institutions may benefit from it. Victim-survivors pay.

The silence is also social. When immigrants are stereotyped as criminals, reporting abuse from within the community can feel like confirming narratives that the community has resisted for years. Victim-survivors fear that when they name the perpetrator, they are also shaming their own people.

And when the US Department of Homeland Security declares that “criminals” have been “hiding” in schools and churches, as it did at the beginning of the second Trump administration, the message that is received—by criminals and noncriminals alike—is, *You are not safe here, either*. When worship spaces are treated as hunting grounds for federal agents, immigrant congregants learn again that they are not safe even in sanctuary. Attendance drops, trust erodes, refuge thins out, and the risk of abuse rises.

Here is the hard truth that many religious leaders would rather not name: US immigration policy deliberately shrinks the conditions for ordinary life. When migrant neighbors live under constant threat, their choices contract—fewer safe places to gather, fewer opportunities to seek help, fewer exits from harmful situations. Anthropologist Nicholas De Genova describes deportability as a “defining horizon”—the “ultimate possibility of deportation” that disciplines life, even beyond the border. When that horizon is intensified through rhetoric, raids, and policy shifts, it functions like a social gag order. Silence becomes enforceable.

So what does this demand of the church? What does it reveal about our spiritual health when houses of refuge become sites of anxiety—when sanctuary is no longer felt as safety?

If you are a church leader, the question is no longer whether you “care about immigrants.” The question is whether your congregation has made truth tellable and protection practicable for those who live under fear, so that coming forward does not multiply danger and seeking help does not require exposure as the price of safety. Here are a few concrete starting points:

1. **Interrogate reflexes about “community.”** Emilie Townes warns that the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” can romanticize unity while hiding harm. Test every appeal to togetherness by the criterion, Does it increase victim-survivor safety and agency? Name cultural betrayal—betrayal from inside the faith family—so that blame stays with the perpetrator.

2. **Practice trauma-informed care with immigration-aware safety planning.** Use direct questions, clarify confidentiality and mandatory reporting limits up front, minimize documentation that could expose families, and connect victim-survivors to culturally competent clinicians and trusted legal-aid partners—without promising sanctuary. Route benevolence through independent channels so that help is never leveraged against people.

3. **Refuse weaponized theology.** Train leaders to reject narratives of forgiving perpetrators, declining to “shame the church” or “protecting our people” as ways to apply communal pressure. Attend to lived theologies, name internalized stigma, and resist forgive-and-forget scripts that silence victim-survivors.

4. **Practice agentic solidarity.** Ask what feels safe, support microcontexts or distance, and let the victim-survivor set the pace.

5. **Build victim-survivor safe structures and institutional courage:** Off-hierarchy reporting, bilingual advocates, no-retaliation commitments, independent investigations, safety audits, accountable timelines, and explicit power boundaries (especially around counseling, closed-door meetings, housing, and transportation). Speak publicly in ways that do not expose undocumented members or turn sanctuary into a spotlight.

What these circumstances communicate about our collective health—our life together—is this: A society’s condition is revealed by where it offers safety and where it fosters fear. When houses of refuge become houses of anxiety—when vulnerable neighbors learn to calculate that silence is safer than truth—we are not merely

debating policy. We are witnessing moral injury on a national scale, carried in bodies, families, and congregations.

Religious communities have long insisted that sacred space should shelter the threatened. If we allow fear to become normal in our sanctuaries, we should not be surprised when predators thrive there, too. Any political project that manufactures fear will create collateral victims—often the very people churches claim to protect. Fear is a predator's ally.