News

A Customs and Border Protection agent near Eagle Pass, Texas, collects information from Venezuelan migrants April 25, 2022, before taking them into custody. In recent months, some Catholic Charities staffers have experienced smears and threats by critics opposed to offering aid to immigrants. (CNS/Reuters/Kaylee Greenlee Beal)

Aleja Hertzler-McCain

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Jack Jenkins

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Religion News Service

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March 26, 2024

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The man who left a recording on Appaswamy "Vino" Pajanor's voicemail earlier this month spoke with an even keel, but his message was anything but calm. Over the course of roughly 40 seconds, the caller accused Pajanor, the head of Catholic Charities San Diego, of "facilitating illegal immigration," "breaking the law" and being "not really Christian."

The man saved his most volatile remarks for last, calling Pajanor, an immigrant and U.S. citizen, "scum" and much worse before ending with "Go back to India, you piece of garbage," according to a recording provided to Religion News Service.

Over the past few months, Pajanor and staffers at Catholic Charities across the country, a decentralized, 113-year-old faith-based nonprofit, have become the targets of right-leaning media personalities, conspiracy theorists and even members of Congress. The smear campaign is rooted in opposition to offering aid to immigrants, which critics frame as incentivizing illegal immigration, while sometimes accusing faith groups of breaking the law or working with drug cartels.

The result has been a series of unsettling incidents that have transpired near or even inside Catholic Charities facilities in what officials say is a rapidly growing threat to their safety.

"We have never seen this level," Pajanor said, referring to the avalanche of vitriol he and his staff have received. "Some of our team members have been here for 20, 30 years, and they have said they have never seen such a thing happen."

> 'Christ weeps at the invocation of His name to justify such outrages.'
> —Cardinal Robert McElroy
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Some local agencies of Catholic Charities assist migrants after they've been processed by Customs and Border Protection, providing resources such as food, clothing and short-term housing before asylum-seekers depart for other parts of the country ahead of a scheduled court date with immigration officials. The Catholic group is one of several faith-based organizations, including Lutheran and Jewish groups, among others, that have long partnered with the federal government to offer such services.

"Catholic Charities agencies staff and volunteers all around the country choose to spend their time serving those most in need, like families whose homes were destroyed by a natural disaster, seniors who can't afford their medicine, and hungry children in need of a nutritious meal," Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, the national membership organization that advocates for local agencies, said in a statement.

"Their work should earn respect and admiration, not demonization."

Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, condemned the demonization of agency employees who work with immigrants. (OSV News/Catholic Charities USA)

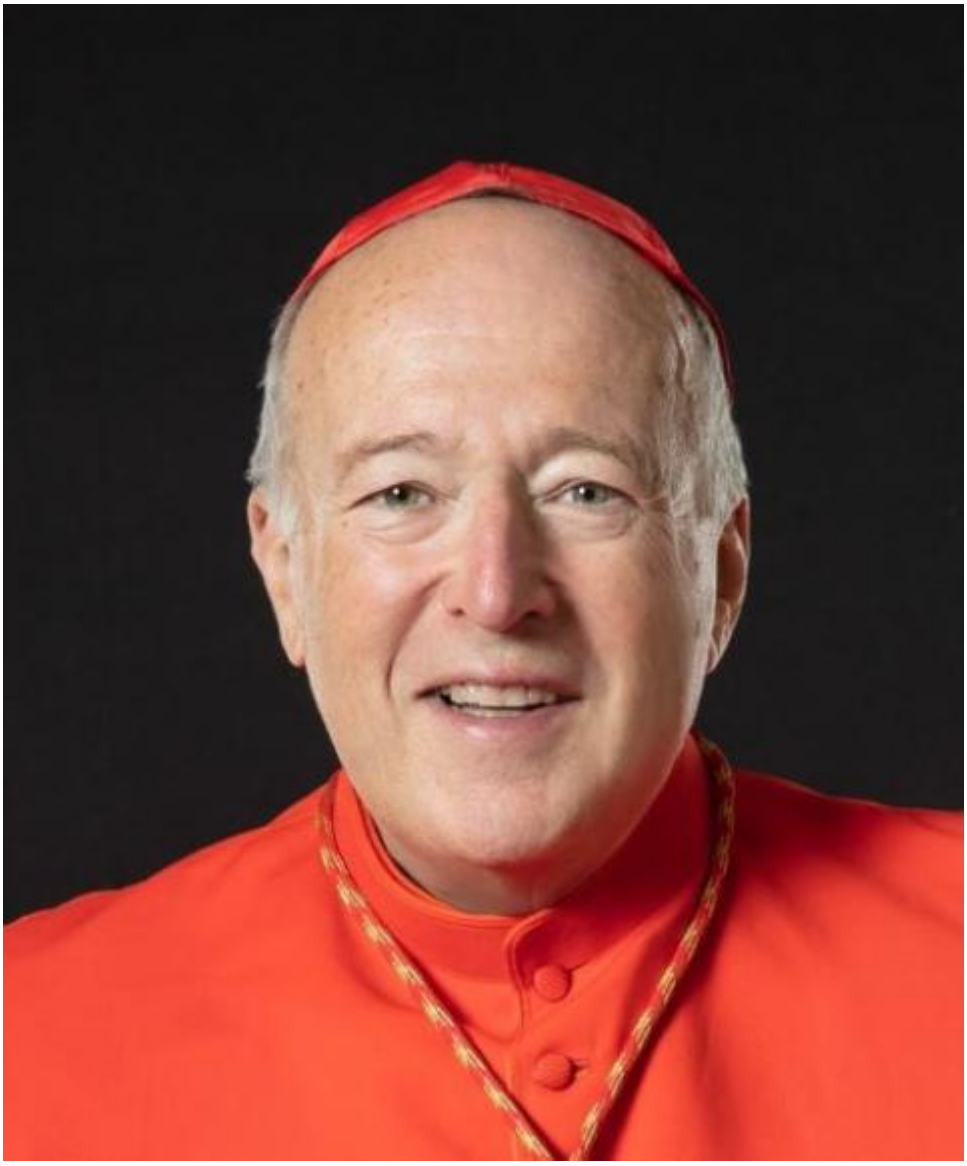
For Pajanor, whose group operates homeless shelters and 14 food pantries in the city, the recent avalanche of hate followed a visit by James O'Keefe, a far-right

provocateur who was recently forced out of Project Veritas, the activist organization he founded, following complaints regarding his treatment of staff. O'Keefe appeared earlier this month with a film crew outside a hotel that was being used by Catholic Charities San Diego to house migrants who had been processed by CBP.

In videos posted to social media, O'Keefe and his team can be seen questioning security guards outside the hotel. O'Keefe even posed as an exterminator to try to gain entry. On multiple occasions, O'Keefe suggests migrants in the hotel came into the country illegally and speculates, without offering evidence, that some were being trafficked.

Pajanor reacted to the allegations with exasperation.

"We are helping those individuals who are here legally," he said. "Every one of them has a notice to appear in a court of law."



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego said, ""Christ weeps at the invocation of His name to justify such outrages" as threats against people working with immigrants. (OSV News photo/Courtesy of Diocese of San Diego)

In his video report, O'Keefe included an image of a whiteboard containing the names and contact information of Catholic Charities and their staff.

"Immediately after that post went viral online people started calling team members with threats," Pajanor said, adding that his team has now increased security at facilities throughout the city, including ones that have nothing to do with migrants.

San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy condemned O'Keefe's actions in a statement to RNS. Describing the incident as an "assault" on Catholic Charities, McElroy accused O'Keefe and his team of "illegal entry," of victimizing legal immigrants and of criticizing the church for providing food and shelter, "as the Lord commands." McElroy also condemned the publicizing of staff's personal identities and data, "subjecting them to death threats and the destruction of their private lives."

"Christ weeps at the invocation of His name to justify such outrages," according to McElroy's emailed statement.

Efforts to reach O'Keefe for comment were unsuccessful.

Migrants look through the border fence Sept.12, 2023, toward food brought by aid workers after gathering between the primary and secondary border fences at the U.S.-Mexico border to wait for processing by U.S immigration officials in San Diego.(OSV News/Reuters/Mike Blake)

Catholic Charities officials say the incident is just the latest in a string of attacks on their work.

Similar videos were made by far-right figures at Catholic Charities facilities in Laredo, Texas, and in Southwestern Ohio, prompting a slew of threatening phone calls and leading the organizations to increase security, the directors of both facilities told RNS.

On Oct. 28, 2023, Stew Peters, a far-right influencer who has expressed pro-Nazi views, said in a speech broadcast to his more than 500,000 followers on both Rumble and X that Catholic Charities helps "coach illegals on how to get admitted here." He then called for shooting Catholic Charities workers, in addition to migrants.

Peters' speech came after over a year of accusations by a handful of Republican House Representatives that Catholic Charities was complicit in "a secretive, taxpayer-funded, and likely illegal operation to move unknown migrants into the United States." Often led by Reps. Lance Gooden of Texas and Tom Tiffany of Wisconsin, a small group of GOP lawmakers have penned letters to Biden administration officials echoing those accusations.

Lawmakers have also formally called on Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services and other faith groups to preserve documents "related to any expenditures submitted for reimbursement from the federal government related to migrants encountered at the Southern border." And House Republicans passed a border bill that included a provision stripping funds from a program that reimburses those offering certain aid to migrants.

> 'We continue to pick up the pieces for the federal government's lack of a policy that promotes order and human dignity for migrants.'
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Jared Holt, an expert on political extremism and senior research analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, noted upticks in anti-immigrant rhetoric are common among conservatives during an election year. But when media outlets and personalities home in on specific groups, he said, the situation can escalate quickly.

"To the degree that this might intensify or escalate any more than it has, I think a lot of that depends on how political leaders in this country conduct themselves," Holt said.

Both Gooden and Tiffany conducted extensive interviews with Michael Voris, the ousted head of now-defunct far-right Catholic media outlet Church Militant who has also been critical of Catholic Charities and their work with migrants. In addition, Rep. Andy Biggs, who signed the letter asking Catholic Charities and others to preserve documents, hosted Ben Bergquam, a far-right activist, on his podcast last May, where Bergquam accused Catholic Charities of operating as a "middle-man" between drug cartels and the CBP.

The synergism between lawmakers and far-right figures was evident during recent incidents surrounding Casa Alitas, a shelter for asylum-seeking migrants run by Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona, an agency of Catholic Charities.

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As in San Diego, O'Keefe posted a video on X on Feb. 7 outside Casa Alitas, this time disguised, in his words, as a "homeless vagrant drunk." Bergquam had also previously highlighted Casa Alitas in one of his January videos.

Citing O'Keefe's video at Casa Alitas, Tiffany and California Rep. Doug LaMalfa visited a Casa Alitas facility two days later and posted their own video, asking employees to allow them to make an unannounced visit, and when turned away, claiming the facility was operating in secrecy and denying them access to information.

Joe Leisz, the director of development for Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona, said lawmakers visiting Arizona at that time had all been invited to tour the organization's regular shelter operations. He said Tiffany "chose to show up, unannounced" at a temporary overflow site.

Representatives for Tiffany, Biggs, Gooden and LaMalfa did not respond to interview requests for this story.

Similarly, Rachel Campos-Duffy, co-host of FOX & Friends Weekend and wife of former Wisconsin Congressman Sean Duffy, filmed segments inside and outside Casa Alitas on Feb. 25 and 26, where, after being asked to leave the facility, she approached clients and walked around filming. At one point, she claimed rocks were thrown at her car.

Gerarado Reconco Lara, center, and his children Maria, 6, and Gerardo, 8, leave a Catholic Charities facility July 23, 2018, in San Antonio. The family, immigrants from Honduras, had been reunited the night before. (RNS/AP/Eric Gay)

Campos-Duffy showed up outside business hours, and according to Leisz, was asked to come back during regular working hours, something FOX denies.

According to a statement sent to RNS by a FOX News spokesperson, "Rachel Campos-Duffy said she was never told to come back during business hours and was only told to leave the property."

The videos from O'Keefe, Tiffany and Campos-Duffy each had millions of views on X.

Leisz said that after the incidents, his colleagues received about 75 "obscene and/or threatening calls" over the course of about a month.

When he shared with callers that his organization's work comes from Matthew 25's call to care for people in need, including strangers, Leisz said, "they tell me the Gospel is wrong."

Rebecca Solloa, the executive director of Catholic Charities in Laredo, said that, while the threatening calls her facility had received were not local, she still instructed her staff to take precautions like avoiding wearing Catholic Charities' apparel in public. "Having seen and learned about what happened in El Paso, anybody can come from the outside to hurt the community," said Solloa, referencing a 2019 mass shooting that killed 23 and which the shooter said was a response "to the Hispanic invasion of Texas."

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Despite the vitriolic rhetoric and conspiracy theories, Tony Stieritz, the CEO of Catholic Charities Southwestern Ohio, which was the target of a Feb. 9 Bergquam video linking the organization to migrants on the border who said they were going to Cincinnati, said that the over 800 volunteers at his facility fall "in love with the work that we do."

"We will stand resolute in serving the poor and vulnerable regardless of where they come from," Stieritz said.

To the members of Congress spreading accusations about Catholic Charities, Stieritz said, "It is Congress' and the (Biden) administration's job to fix the broken immigration system. We continue to pick up the pieces for the federal government's lack of a policy that promotes order and human dignity for migrants."

"Let's not stoop so low as to pick on the people who are trying to do the Christian work of the Gospel. Please work together in a bipartisan way to figure out the challenges that we all share," he said.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 12-25, 2024** print issue under the headline: Catholic Charities threatened: Far-right smear campaign rooted in opposition to offering aid to immigrants to .