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Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, is seen Feb. 26, 2019, at the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Seitz spoke of a "broader, brutal, historical project in Texas to criminalize and police people who migrate" during a lecture March 18 at Fairfield University. (OSV News/David Agren)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's legal efforts [to shut down](#) a Catholic migrant shelter network in El Paso, Texas, is the latest example of the Lone Star State trying to criminalize migrants and migration, said El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz.

"The attack on Annunciation House represents an escalation in Texas' efforts in recent years to militarize the border and to enact legislation criminalizing migration and people who migrate," Seitz said during a recent lecture at Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution in Connecticut.

Seitz also referenced controversial enforcement actions that Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a conservative Republican who is Catholic, has implemented to highlight the "[border crisis](#)" that he and other Republican politicians argue was caused by President Joseph Biden, a Democrat who is also Catholic.

"You have seen the Humvees and the concertina wire and the National Guardsmen on the television," said Seitz, who described those scenes as "transparently political" and part of a "broader, brutal, historical project in Texas to criminalize and police people who migrate."

Said Seitz, "People of faith have a duty to resist these racist projects."

The bishop's March 18 talk was not livestreamed, but the university shared video of the event with NCR. The event was co-sponsored by America Media, the Jesuit-run news organization.



A family of migrants is dropped off by a transport contractor for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection at a shelter run by Annunciation House Dec. 13, 2022, in downtown El Paso, Texas. A state judge blocked the Texas attorney general's demands for the records of Annunciation House March 11, 2024, citing concerns the state had a "predetermined" motive to shut down the Catholic nonprofit serving migrants. (OSV News/Reuters/Ivan Pierre Aguirre)

Following the lead of former President Donald Trump, the Republican Party's presumptive 2024 presidential nominee, conservative Republicans and right-wing political activists in Texas and across the country in recent years have seized on immigration as an issue to hammer Biden since shortly after his inauguration in January 2021.

Abbott and the Republican governors of Arizona and Florida have generated headlines and raised their political profiles [by chartering buses](#) to transport thousands of migrants to so-called "sanctuary cities" like Washington D.C., Chicago,

Denver and New York City. In 2022, Abbott [mobilized](#) the Texas National Guard to patrol the border and apprehend migrants crossing into the United States without legal documents.

In the Biden era, Catholic agencies that have long assisted migrants have also been on the receiving end of criticisms tinged with partisan politics.

In 2022, the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank led by [Kevin Roberts](#), a conservative Catholic, [accused](#) Catholic Charities and other faith-based agencies of "actively helping process and transport tens of thousands of illegal aliens into the interior of the United States." That same year, CatholicVote, a controversial pro-Trump group, [filed](#) a lawsuit against the Biden administration where it suggested that church-affiliated agencies in southern Texas were contributing to the "chaos" at the border.

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In recent months, House Republicans balked at a compromise bipartisan border security bill, [reportedly because Trump](#) wants to campaign on the immigration issue. The bill would have funded new border fencing and [authorized](#) federal agents to close the border depending on the number of daily "illegal" migrant crossings.

Appointed by Pope Francis in 2013 to be the sixth Catholic bishop of El Paso, Seitz told his audience at Fairfield University that the United States' two major political parties nearly enacted a "major legislative assault on our system of asylum and protection at the border."

"This was a moment when serious political leaders considered suspending our obligations to the vulnerable just because they became politically inconvenient," said Seitz, who added that he has become increasingly frustrated at how often "the complexity and nuance at the border are flattened and manipulated" by politicians, pundits and media commentators who speak of migration as a threat.

"Let me be clear," Seitz said. "As someone who lives this reality everyday, this is not just a willful mischaracterization, but is often part of a deliberate historical project of dehumanization at the border."



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, shares a smile with a Honduran girl named Cesia as he walks and prays with a group of migrants at the Lerdo International Bridge in El Paso June 27, 2019. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

In February, Paxton — a hardline conservative Republican who [survived](#) an impeachment vote in September 2023 amid accusations that he used his office to protect a political donor — [suggested](#) that Annunciation House was "facilitating illegal entry" into the United States by engaging in "human smuggling" and operating a "stash house."

Vowing to shut down the nonprofit and have its assets liquidated, Paxton sought to have the Texas state court system force Annunciation House to comply with his request for records. On March 11, a judge in El Paso [blocked](#) the attorney general's request and questioned the state's intention to probe the 46-year-old shelter that has served poor Central American migrants for almost 50 years.

The legal battle over Annunciation House, which is still pending in court, galvanized religious leaders and faith-based organizations in a borderland community that encompasses El Paso, Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The Diocese of El Paso was among several local organizations that hosted a March 22 vigil and march for human dignity in El Paso.

[Outspoken in his defense](#) of Annunciation House, Seitz also participated in the vigil. A few days before that event, Seitz told the audience at Fairfield University on March 18 that the El Paso migrant shelter works very closely with parishes and their own migration ministries.

"I issued a strenuous defense of Annunciation House not only because I know the work that the organization does very intimately, but also on account of some more profound, rather more foundational reasons," said Seitz, who reflected on migration in spiritual terms as a "privileged space in which the salvific mystery is being acted out."

Said Seitz, "It is important that the entire church community, the entire Catholic community, in the United States organize a robust, tenacious and unrelenting and eloquent defense of the rights of those who migrate, in season and out."

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