Sanctuary and Sacred Resistance in the Diocese of Los Angeles: A Theopolitical Reflection from a Priest-Organizer

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At the end of 2016, following a tumultuous, rhetoric-filled presidential campaign season, many progressive-leaning people of faith were at a loss about the election results. Across faith traditions, this was not about partisan politics, but instead about a deep concern over a breakdown of core values—values that advocate following the Golden Rule and promote love, compassion, and justice for all human persons. As the Rev. William Barber, national leader of the Poor People's Campaign, said about the election of Donald Trump, it was a "symptom of a deeper moral malady behind racist, xenophobic policies." ¹

Enter the work of a cadre of members of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, in partnership with faith and community allies. On one fateful day—December 3, 2016—the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles adopted a resolution declaring itself a "sanctuary diocese." In my capacity as a priest-organizer, a first-generation Latinx American born to Mexican immigrant parents, and someone who's been active in faith-rooted social justice and immigrant rights work for many years, I felt that we were in a critical moment of deep pastoral need and political and moral challenge, and that the church needed to act within its prayerful, prophetic tradition in response to the impending attack on immigrants, refugees, and other vulnerable communities. While I was the one who presented and organized support for the emergency resolution at Diocesan Convention with the help of

¹ William Barber, interviewed on Democracy Now!, "Rev. William Barber: Trump Is a Symptom of a Deeper Moral Malady behind Racist, Xenophobic Policies," January 9, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/1/9/rev_william

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many colleagues, we were by no means the originators of the idea. Some of our congregations had been here before, in various iterations.² However, coming on the heels of the 2016 presidential election, when the president-elect campaigned on highly inflammatory rhetoric and xenophobic ideas (as in his speech about Mexicans being "rapists, drug-dealers"), and where favorite chants of campaign rallies were "build that wall," many of us fully expected this caustic speech to turn into policy. This soon became reality after inauguration on January 21, 2017, but on December 3, we were gearing up for a battle over human dignity.³ Following our initial organizing efforts to become a sanctuary diocese in Los Angeles, we have spent the last few years figuring out what this means in practice. As a source of inspiration, we have adopted the term *sacred resistance* as our rallying cry. This term first emerged at an interfaith gathering convened by CLUE, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, a longtime partner, just a few days before Diocesan Convention.⁴ As the local Episcopal branch of this broader interfaith movement, we are now in the early stages of fully living out a theology of Sacred Resistance. For me, this means recovering the social movement spirit of Christianity, of challenging forms of systemic oppression—in this case against our immigrant/undocumented siblings—and understanding this work of the liberation of God's people as central to who God is, and central to our worship of God. Said another way, Sacred Resistance is about recovering the sacredness of humanity first, which comes from God, and then resisting the policies and systems that oppress second. Sacred Resistance is deep, consistent political engagement rooted in the most profound spiritual truths of our faith tradition as Christians, and it calls us to pursue a prophetic path, and to challenge imperial ones—from our Abrahamic origins, to the life and witness of Jesus Christ, to the

² Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Nora Hamilton, and James Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 6 (2009): 101–26.

³ Center for Migration Studies of New Work, "President Trump's Executive Orders on Immigration and Refugees," accessed online via https://cmsny.org/trumps -executive-orders-immigration-refugees/. On January 23, 2017, Donald Trump issued several executive orders that negatively impactive immigrant and refugee communities.

⁴ At this gathering on December 1, CLUE called on all attendees to sign a pledge to resist. This pledge can be found at "Heeding the Call to Resist," Sacred Resistance L.A., http://www.lasacredresistance.org/about.html.

earliest collectivist traditions of the early church.⁵ Understanding the mission and ministry of the church today in this way has significant implications for all congregations, albeit in different ways.

This article will serve as an initial theopolitical reflection on the collective work of lay and clergy leaders in the Diocese of Los Angeles—the emergence of Sacred Resistance—a little over two years into this effort. This work can serve as an example to other dioceses, denominations, and people of faith seeking justice for immigrants, and it merits theological reflection in light of the political and social realities of our time: the anti-immigrant rhetoric central to the presidential campaign that has indeed become the policy agenda of the Trump administration. 6 This agenda has resulted in an undermining of programs that provide temporary relief such as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and TPS (Temporary Protected Status), an increase in aggressive immigration enforcement, further militarization of the US-Mexico border, the separation of migrant and asylumseeking families, and the increased detention of children. In addition to covering the work on Sacred Resistance with respect to immigrant rights, I hope to offer some closing thoughts on where I believe this work should go in the future.

The First Moment of Sacred Resistance: Proclaiming the Episcopal Diocese as a Place of Sanctuary

The passing of the resolution declaring Los Angeles as a "sanctuary diocese" was a major moment in the development of Sacred Resistance. As we lay and clergy representatives of all of the Episcopal congregations and institutions in the Diocese of Los Angeles gathered, it was essential that this collective body know, feel, understand, and fully "own" this call to action. It's one thing to pass a resolution; it's something else altogether to put organizing "boots on the ground" to make it a powerful and tangible expression of our common life of faith. This is precisely what happened. Following my initial presentation of the resolution before the convention floor, there were a number of people speaking for the proposal, a few people raising questions, and one person speaking against it. The most powerful moment, in my opinion, took place when the Rev. Nancy Frausto, a

 $^{^5\,}$ See Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

 $^{^6\,}$ Sarah Pierce and Andrew Selee, "Immigration under Trump: A Review of Policy Shifts in the Year Since the Election," $Migration\ Policy\ Institute\ (2017).$

friend and priest colleague, shared her story, which had everything to do with the issue at hand:

I urge you to vote yes on this. At eight years old I crossed the border with my mother and my brother. I have been in this country living in the shadows most of my life. And it was the church who gave me hope. It was the people of All Saints Highland Park who got me through school and college, and put me through seminary. It is this church that I've been ordained in and accepted in that has given me the faith to continue moving on. It is such a scary position to be in right now. I could lose my work permit and be deported back to a country that I do not know. And I am one in over 700,000 DACA recipients. I know that there are people in here who would willingly handcuff their hands to me if immigration ever comes to me. But you know what . . . there are maybe others who don't have that! And we need to be a light for them. This diocese needs to say, "Hell yeah, I am here for everybody! Everyone is welcome!"7

Nancy shared these powerful and heartfelt words, rooted in her experience, as she spoke in favor of a resolution calling Los Angeles to become a sanctuary diocese, and at the close of this impassioned testimony and statement, there was a palpable shift in the room as nearly everyone stood in cheerful solidarity and applause. The Rev. Frausto, in courageously sharing her story of coming to the United States sin papeles at an early age, moved the hearts and minds of the over one hundred churches and institutions of the Diocese of Los Angeles in just about one minute. She spoke truth to power on a number of levels—as someone who was "one of us," who had grown up in the church, and yet had a different story to share. She was both priest and immigrant. Ordained and undocumented. A Dreamer priest. This was a beautiful moment—to see, hear, and feel the love and solidarity in the room. It was the fruition of one veteran community organizer, Fred Ross's, axioms: "The duty of the organizer is to provide people with the opportunity to work for what they believe in."8 People be-

⁷ Facebook Live Video recorded by Mike Kinman, December 3, 2016, 3:46 pm, 6:36–7:57. https://www.facebook.com/mike.kinman/videos/10101407893277384/.

⁸ Fred Ross Sr., "Axioms for Organizers," https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworker movement/essays/essays/MillerArchive/064%20Axioms%20For%20Organizers.pdf (1989).

lieved in the testimony shared by Nancy, and were taking the next step to put their faith into action.

The Resolution

The resolution making the Diocese of Los Angeles a sanctuary diocese explicitly called for the following: (1) active resistance to policy proposals that planned to target and deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and eliminate programs (DACA, TPS) that provided temporary relief for members of the immigrant community; (2) connection with other local and national sanctuary communities and institutions, immigrant rights groups, and coalitions; (3) engagement with educating, organizing, advocacy, and nonviolent direct action; and (4) utilization of other methods as deemed appropriate in each context, to ensure the safety and security of those targeted due to immigration status. It called our congregations, institutions of the diocese, and members of these entities "to serve as places of welcome, refuge, healing, and other forms of material and pastoral support for those targeted by hate due to immigration status or some perceived status of difference," and for us to "work alongside our friends, families, and neighbors to ensure the dignity and human rights of all people."9

As Episcopalians, the Baptismal Covenant is central to our theological understanding of individual and corporate mission and ministry in the world. In fact, my assertion is that the Baptismal Covenant provides us with a clear theology of Sacred Resistance—a way of being in the world that seeks to resist evil, proclaim an *agape* love of action, and to fight for the human dignity of all. Understood this way, we can begin to examine our current ways of "doing church," and assess strengths and weaknesses in order to more fully live into this call. It is also a call to continue to raise up indigenous leadership within our communities, at all levels—both lay and ordained. We articulated this support for Sacred Resistance in a "Frequently Asked Questions" about the resolution:

One of the core promises of our baptismal covenant is to "persevere in resisting evil." In our work of Sacred Resistance, we have understood that as a call to stand in resistance to the systemic evils that oppress and marginalize any member of our human family—including but not limited to

⁹ The entire of the Sanctuary Diocese Resolution can be found at "Heeding the Call to Resist," http://www.lasacredresistance.org/about.html.

racism, sexism, nativism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Grounded in our baptismal promises, our resistance to public policies that perpetuate those evils is how we put our faith into action in the world.¹⁰

As such, in its formation and in the practice of doing the work of advocacy and organizing, the resolution to become a sanctuary diocese came out of these core understandings of our faith tradition.¹¹

Getting to Work! Public Ritual, Rapid Response, and Advocacy as Sacred Resistance

Upon passing the resolution to become a sanctuary diocese, the work quickly began. A Sanctuary Task Force of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles was formed, which became the convening structure and organizing entity of the work. Consisting of a dozen clergy and lay leaders appointed by the Bishop's Office, the Task Force also involves additional congregational and community partners. The work is coordinated by two co-chairs, also appointed by the bishop. 12 Soon after the resolution passed, members of the Sanctuary Task Force began engaging in public witness on the streets. When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel joined Dr. Martin Luther King and others at the historic march in Selma, he famously said that he felt as if "his legs were praying."13 This is exactly what Sacred Resistance means when people of faith engage in acts of public ritual and civil disobedience today. Over the course of close to two years, we have been on the streets dozens of times, and have organized two large-scale civil disobedience interfaith actions around sanctuary and immigrant rights. We are not protesting in the traditional sense, although there is nothing wrong with protesting. Everyone that I have come across that has participated in planning, and has shown up on the day of action, is clear that this a form of worship. This is why is it sacred. In the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, who says, "Is not this the fast that

 $^{^{10}\,\,}$ "Heeding the Call to Resist," http://www.lasacredresistance.org/about.html.

^{11 &}quot;What We Believe," The Episcopal Church, https://www.episcopalchurch.org/baptismal-covenant.

 $^{^{12}}$ I have served as the Co-Chair of the Sanctuary Task Force since its inception, with my colleague the Rev. Jaime Edwards-Acton.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "My Legs Were Praying: Theology and Politics in Abraham Joshua Heschel," October 10, 2012, the Shalom Center, https://theshalom.center.org/node/174.

I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isa. 58:6 NRSV). We lift up that tradition. Again, hearkening to the Baptismal Covenant, which clearly articulates a resistance to evil, this is what it means when we engage in such action.

One of our first actions under the identity of Sacred Resistance took place just a few weeks after the resolution was passed at Diocesan Convention, On December 23, 2016, the Task Force initiated an Interfaith Posada entitled "Sanctuary for All," centering on the Latin American tradition of reenacting the journey that Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem for Jesus's birth. 14 As the story goes, Jesus was born in a manger, a place meant for animals, "because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). This powerful narrative has long been a part of the Latin@ religious tradition and the Mexican-American experience in the United States, both as a catechism of the biblical narrative, and also in drawing powerful connections to contemporary immigrant/ migration experiences. ¹⁵ The procession began at a Methodist church in historic Olvera Street with prayer and song, and then proceeded to an evening procession, carrying los peregrinos, Joseph and Mary, at the front of the procession. Rabbis, Aztec dancers, immigrant families, mariachi musicians, and Christian clergy from various denominations all walked together, sang De Colores, and chanted "Sanctuary, not deportation!" Our final destination was the Metropolitan Detention Center, a temporary holding facility for immigrant detention where, within twenty-four hours of arrival, immigrant detainees are either sent to long-term detention in Adelanto, or are deported.

From this first action, our theology of Sacred Resistance began to emerge. It took greater shape and focus just a few months later, following the new administration's executive orders calling for more aggressive immigration enforcement. While the prior administration had deported a record number of immigrants over eight years, it had also passed DACA (through the advocacy and organizing of Dreamers), and had limited deportations to persons with active deportation orders with criminal convictions. Under the new administration, the executive order made clear that anyone who was here "unauthorized"

A video produced by the Arts and Culture Caucus AltoTrump Los Angeles captures the posada: National Day Laborer Organizing Network, "On Thursday December 23rd, Interfaith Leaders and Immigrant Rights Activists from across . . . ," Facebook video, https://www.facebook.com/NDLON/videos/1533614833333485/.

¹⁵ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 36–38.

(meaning anyone without papers) could be subject to detention and removal. 16 This came to a head quickly in Los Angeles, when Romulo Avélica was detained in front of his daughter in Highland Park, a neighborhood of Los Angeles. Romulo did not have an active deportation order, but did have a prior DUI on his record. Despite having met his obligations as a result of that DUI years before, it remained on his record, and ICE decided to enforce a deportation order. Our network moved to action, along with immigrant rights and other faith partners. Through this rapid response and collective effort, Romulo's deportation was prevented. Although he was detained for several months, advocacy and legal effort paid off, and he was eventually released. 17 While there had been rapid response networks developed in past years through immigrant rights advocates, the grassroots response and experience of Rómulo's case led to a revamping of this network, which now included greater and more formal participation from faith networks, from CLUE to our Sanctuary/Sacred Resistance Task Force. 18 Members of our task force were a consistent presence at press conferences, rallies, and hearings related to Rómulo, and provided pastoral and advocacy support throughout.

Sacred Resistance Embodied: The Story of St. Luke's Long Beach

While each of these stories merits deeper study and explanation, I want to offer just a glimpse of the way that the work of Sacred Resistance has played out in a particular congregational setting. St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Long Beach, a multicultural parish with a history of social justice engagement, moved quickly upon the invitation and call that was given at Diocesan Convention. The then Interim Rector, Ricardo Avila, reached out to me as the Co-Chair of the Sanctuary Task Force, letting me know that he was initiating a discernment process and conversation with his vestry leadership and the congregation about designating itself as a sanctuary church. This was not St. Luke's first time at this work. In 2007, as part of the New Sanctuary Movement, St. Luke's offered sanctuary to a woman named Liliana and her

Pierce and Selee, "Immigration under Trump."

Andrea Castillo, "L.A. Immigrant Who Spent Six Months in Detention Describes Harsh Conditions at Adelanto Facility," Los Angeles Times, October 8, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-romulo-avelica-adelanto-20181008-story.html.

This network is called the L.A. Raids Rapid Response Network. https://thelafed.org/releases/los-angeles-raids-rapid-response-network-urges-immigrant-families-seek-help/.

two-month-old son when immigration reform was actively being debated in Congress. 19 However, while there was support for this among the congregation, there was also conflict and tension about the decision. Knowing this history, but feeling the call to respond faithfully, the Rev. Avila and congregational leaders began a more intentional discernment and education process, hosting educational forums and discussions on Sundays, consulting with legal and immigrant rights activists, and learning about the legalities and risks of providing physical sanctuary in a new era. I assisted in providing legal support from attorneys versed in sanctuary issues. Over several months, the vestry felt equipped and certain enough of congregational support to pass a resolution affirming the diocesan call to sanctuary, and identifying its involvement in three tiers: providing rapid response to support local individual and families affected by immigration enforcement, providing financial support for a legal fund, and becoming a place of physical sanctuary, if and when needed.²⁰

In the same year that St. Luke's adopted this support for sanctuary, a need and opportunity arose for them to work more intently. In the summer of 2017, a group of migrant detainees at Adelanto Detention Center engaged in a hunger strike to protest the harsh treatment and conditions inside the long-term detention facility in the high desert of southern California. One of the hunger strikers was Alex Burgos, a young man who had fled Honduras because of death threats he had received from the local gangs in his region. Through the partnership that Sacred Resistance had with CLUE, we became aware of the need that Alex had to find an outside sponsor. In particular, we learned from the attorney providing pro-bono legal support for his case that the judge was amenable to his release while his asylum claim was heard, if he could be released to a reputable sponsor, such as a church. With St. Luke's having done their homework, it proved to be a match made in heaven. The participation of lay leaders has been essential in this effort. While Alex lives on the church premises, and the church offers material, spiritual, and other forms of support, including advocacy for his case, Alex has also fully integrated into the life of the community. He has also continued to share his story and

Pat McCaughan, "California Congregation Shelters Mother Facing Deportation," The Episcopal Church, June 10, 2007, https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/california-congregation-shelters-mother-facing-deportation.

²⁰ Public letter written by the Rev. Ricardo Avila, Interim Rector, St. Luke's Long Beach, dated August 17, 2017.

speak to the experience that many Central American migrants, especially from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, are now facing. ²¹ Moreover, the Rev. Nancy Frausto joined St. Luke's as their Associate Rector just as the congregation was considering providing hospitality and solidarity for Alex. Her role at St. Luke's has been instrumental, as she provides pastoral support and continues to inform the community through her own story and the Sacred Resistance activism she engages in on behalf of others. Alex remains in residence at St. Luke's a year later, while he works with this legal counsel to address his asylum claim. Since Alex entered into residence, the need for solidarity and support of asylum-seeking individuals and families has only grown. The fall of 2018 saw the influx of migrants through the Central American exodus, with thousands of families seeking asylum for various reasons—from political and domestic violence to abject poverty. ²²

What's Next for Sacred Resistance

The collective work of Sacred Resistance, and the role of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles a few years into this organizing ministry, has engaged in a cross-section of activities, methods, and tactics. There has been individual and collective pastoral accompaniment of immigrants to immigration appointments ("ICE Check-ins"), public acts of civil disobedience and liturgical rituals in front of detention centers, the provision of physical hospitality to immigrant families in asylum proceedings, letter-writing and legislative visits, meetings with immigration officials, and many other efforts. Over the course of the past two and half years, the work has expanded from a dedicated core of lay and clergy activists to dozens of congregations and diocesan institutions discerning their role in this movement. In light of the current crisis, in which thousands of Central American families, primarily from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), have fled their countries of origin due to gang violence, political instability, persecution, and economic despair, and in light of the federal

²¹ Stephanie Rivera, "Escaping Violence Twice, and Now in Asylum Limbo, Honduran Immigrant Finds Refuge in Long Beach Church," *Long Beach Post*, January 6, 2019, .https://lbpost.com/immigration/escaping-violence-twice-and-now-in-asylum-limbo-honduran-immigrant-finds-refuge-in-long-beach-church/?fbclid=IwAR24t0TOU zDYstCe9cvfAQpOYquDkqENBjWwhDRDDEsUPa5UOYWH_z4u-kI.

²² Kevin Casas-Zamora, "The Roots of Central America's Exodus," the Inter-American Dialogue Address delivered at 2016 Annual Conference "The Challenges of Contemporary Mass Migration," Center for Migration Studies, September 23, 2016, https://cmsny.org/publications/the-roots-of-central-americas-exodus/.

government's increased attacks on asylum and immigration policy, the work has shifted primarily toward pastoral and material support and advocacy for families seeking asylum.²³ The Diocese is currently accompanying several families who are now residing in Los Angeles, as part of an ecumenical, interfaith effort.²⁴ This new phase of the ministry has been instrumental in expanding the level of participation from parishes and lay members throughout the Diocese. Lay and clergy members are assisting with transportation, buying groceries, getting kids enrolled in school, and providing all of the basic needs that families have as they integrate into the Los Angeles region.

What's next for Sacred Resistance in Los Angeles? While the work of accompanying families in the asylum process and other immigrants at risk of detention and deportation will continue, the intent for Sacred Resistance from the beginning has been to stand with all persons who are targeted for any "perceived status of difference." Our plan is to develop organizing initiatives that lead us as a Diocese into expanding into what it means to be a sanctuary diocese. We have powerful models and examples from partner groups, such as the American Friends Service Committee's notion of sanctuary everywhere: "the simple idea that everyday people can work to keep each other safe—wherever we are. Sanctuary can mean taking someone into a congregation to protect them, but even broader than that, sanctuary is about the community coming together to protect those who need it." AFSC defines this concept in more detail:

That means standing up to discrimination, harassment, and violence in our schools, congregations, public spaces, cities, streets, and everywhere it happens. Whether we are welcoming refugees or working to stop deportations, protecting religious groups who have been targeted and attacked, working to ensure that Black Lives Matter by interrupting anti-Black violence, or protecting the rights of LGBTQ people, we are all in this together. Through Sanctuary Everywhere, we hope to equip thousands of people with tools and training to interrupt hateful acts and government actions that put our communities at risk, and to encourage concrete policies and

²³ Casas-Zamora, "Roots of Central America's Exodus."

Pat McCaughan and Janet Kawamoto, "Miracles Abound for Refugee Family from Honduras," Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, April 18, 2019, https://diocesela.org/uncategorized/miracles-abound-for-refugee-family-from-honduras/.
"Heeding the Call to Resist."

practices that create greater safety and a welcoming environment for all.²⁶

In theological terms, I associate the current work of Sacred Resistance, in its broad interfaith and community conception, with the theological and sociopolitical analysis of the condition of poverty in Latin America as described by liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez spoke of "irruption of the poor" onto the scene in Latin America in the late 1960s. As the condition of poverty became more known and social movements from working-class, rural, peasants, and students emerged, Gutierrez described this irruption as "the new presence of those who had actually been absent in our society and in the church. By absent we mean of little or no significance, as well as being without the opportunity to manifest their sufferings, solidarities, projects, and hopes."27 As injustice persisted, and these movements began to take hold in response, the church was forced to take notice. Gutierrez and many other theologians began to speak to this situation and call the church to be agents and participants in this work of liberation. While much time has passed, and many other waves and generations of liberation theology have developed both in Latin America and in the United States, this notion of an irruption remains a profound truth. The movement of Sacred Resistance, in its own way, is helping to bring to light "an irruption" of the immigrant/migrant/ refugee narrative and experience onto the scene in Los Angeles and beyond. This current irruption is about challenging the most recent round of dehumanization that immigrant communities have faced for generations. My hope is that subsequent irruptions will also include the broader scope of "sanctuary everywhere" as referenced above. As these irruptions bring the church closer to the experience of the most vulnerable members of our community, we return to the essence of our gospel faith, and to the best of our denominational tradition. As a priest-organizer in the Los Angeles corner of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement, I see this work of Sacred Resistance as a significant collective contribution moving us just a bit closer to creating a society where human dignity is a reality for all people.

²⁶ "Sanctuary Everywhere," American Friends Service Committee, https://www.afsc.org/story/sanctuaryeverywhere.

²⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Option for the Poor," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 23–24.