

Episode 1: Catholic Sanctuary

CT: Thank you for tuning in and welcome to our podcast. I'm Camilo Toruño, a senior at Amherst College majoring in English and Spanish.

KL: I'm Keewang Lee, and I'm also a senior English major at Amherst College.

CT: The Sanctuary Movement was a faith-based and political campaign in the 1980s to give Central American migrants who were fleeing civil wars refuge in the United States. The New Sanctuary Movement began in 2006 and has evolved over time and in response to different immigration policies, though the tradition and providing safe haven continues to exist in many congregations within the United States.

KL: We met with Carlos Ruiz Martinez, a PhD student at the University of Iowa, to discuss his research on sanctuary and contemplate how the Sanctuary Movement might be losing its radical aims of resisting the state.

Welcome Carlos. Thank you for joining us so much. It's really a pleasure. And, so yeah, we're joined with Carlos Ruiz Martinez today, a PhD student at the University of Iowa who is researching the Sanctuary Movement and its histories and also its relation to the Catholic Church. And thanks for doing this interview with us.

CRM: Thanks for having me on. It was such a pleasure to join your class earlier in the semester, and I look forward to this conversation.

CT: Great. So I think that we can, I'd like to begin to hear just some personal background and personal motivations for researching sanctuary and how you first became involved in the movement?

CRM: Yeah. So I am, I was born in Mexico and moved to the United States when I was five years old. I grew up in Tennessee. And so sort of issues of immigration have always been personal to me. And then when I moved to graduate school in, at St. Louis University, that's where I completed an MA, I learned that there was a case of sanctuary in Maplewood, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis. And I had never really considered myself a scholar of immigration. I was interested in religion broadly. But this case in particular, I knew that I wanted to work with ethnographic methods, and so essentially talking to people, anthropology.

And this case presented a, you know, I hate to frame it in a way as like opportunity because it's an awful, awful situation, this family separation. But thinking about it to, just to answer, to bracket that, to answer your question directly, it presented an opportunity for me to talk to people

and do ethnographic research for a class. And then that, after talking to Alex Garcia, who was the person in sanctuary in Maplewood, after meeting his family, after talking to members of the church, then I began to answer questions about like ‘okay, what is it that makes the spaces such as churches sort of exceptions to the rule in the eyes of the state now?’ And so that’s when I began to look at history and how historically.

CT: I guess just to get kind of a timeline, when did you first meet Alex Garcia? Was that, is that correct name? I guess [**CRM:** Yep] I guess what years are we talking about?

CRM: Yeah, so I met Alex Garcia in August of - no it was September of 2018. And I think why I learned about the case or how I learned about the case was that September of 2018 marked the one-year anniversary since he entered sanctuary at Christ Church. And so I think through Facebook or through social media or something I saw events that were not celebrating but sort of pointing attention to the fact that he had been there for one year. And that's when I met him. I actually emailed the pastor, Becky Turner, who's pastor of Christ Church, to ask if I could come and introduce myself to Alex and to talk to members of the congregation.

One of the things that I think is worth mentioning though is that, even though I wanted to talk about sanctuary and I wanted to explore Alex's case, I also knew that these sanctuary cases are so highly publicized and sanctuary seekers are always talking to the media. And I didn't want to add to that. And so I knew that, I knew going into it that I wanted my focus to be the church members themselves and sort of leave, it's Alex's story fundamentally right, but I didn't want to make it about him to not add, in order to not continue to add to sort of the pressures of the media that he lived and sort of answering the same questions over and over. So I thought that my focus, it would be better to focus on the congregation rather than Alex.

KL: This kind of is continuing your I guess personal involvement with the Sanctuary Movement, but how do you think the Sanctuary Movement interacts with Catholicism more generally?

CRM: Historical narratives of the Sanctuary Movement tend to not account for the role of Catholicism very well. I think you have this focus on, you know thinking historically in the ‘80s, Jim Corbett and John Fife. One of them was a Quaker, the other was a Presbyterian. So it tends to be a lot of focus on Protestants. So I want to say like, ‘yeah, Catholics too were part of the story. But not just Catholics; it's Catholic Women Religious, I think, who were the sort of flag bearers of Catholicism in the Sanctuary Movement.’ And I think that's important. I think, I want two moves. I want to say Catholics are also part of the Sanctuary Movement, but you can't just talk about Catholics generally. You have to acknowledge the fact that it was Catholic Women Religious who were the most involved.

CT: And sensitive locations are defined as churches, hospitals, and schools. And then what you're kind of exploring now through your dissertation research is how this - what language would you use to describe how churches have become?

CRM: I think what I'm, yeah, I think that the language that I try to use is 'an extension of the carceral state.' I don't know that calling them jails, you know I used to call churches, say 'churches had become jails.' But I think that language is too specific and sort of like, well it's not a jail right, it's still a church, but it has a sort of similar function in some ways. So I think I'm saying 'through the sensitive locations memo, churches become a part of the carceral state.' If that's where I'm at right now with battling, which –

KL: Yeah, I mean I think this is really just fascinating. The way, I mean cuz a lot of this is what we've also been discussing in our own class; just the liminality of space in churches and kind of that feeling of being entrapped. How, when you were researching other churches that were trying maybe or were in the process of declaring sanctuaries, was there a lot of challenges to declaring as sanctuaries because of this idea, this issue than liminality and kind of entrapment, like incarceration, I guess?

CRM: I think churches, from what I've seen, churches are hesitant to, some churches are hesitant to declare themselves sanctuaries for multiple reasons. So some churches that might be politically they might be conservative on issues of immigration will, you know, like 'no we're not doing that' right? Some churches might lean progressive and be interested in the idea, but they can't get a consensus among the congregation and ultimately choose not to do that. So all that to say that there are many different reasons for why they don't declare themselves sanctuary.

What I have not seen though is churches choosing not to declare sanctuary because it entraps. And I think that is why I'm so interested in this question because I think when we think of sanctuary, we think about it as a good thing, right? *A de facto* 'oh you are a good thing.' And I want to be very clear that, yes, sanctuary provides some immediate relief for migrants. We saw that in the '80s. You see it now. When I think about Alex Garcia and my conversations with him and his family, I am convinced that he would do it again, that he would enter sanctuary again. It prevented, entering sanctuary prevented him from being deported. And so I don't want to sidestep the fact that sanctuary does provide very real and very immediate relief, but I am interested in how the state itself sort of like plays into that in order to limit migrant mobility in very specific ways. So yes, just as he was provided relief, he was also, just as he was provided relief, he was also imprisoned by the walls of the church.

And it is that second part that I don't think gets discussed enough. And my worry in a sense is that if you don't account for that, you can sort of unintentionally just play into the aims of the state under the guise of religion, if that makes sense. Like, you think you're doing something

good and sort of challenging the state, you hear that language a lot with resistance to anti-immigrant policies. But in some ways, sanctuary today is affecting the internal policies of the state in some ways.

I think what I find most striking about the sensitive locations memo, especially the first iteration in 1993, is how it actually changed the game of sanctuary. So if in 1980s, before the '93 sensitive locations memo, you had cases like La Purisima Catholic Church where there were *jornaleros*, who were day laborers looking for work. And there was an INS raid, and they ran into a Catholic church as mass was ongoing, as a service was ongoing, and INS agents actually entered and apprehended them. That would not be, INS said that they weren't actively going into churches, but they would and they did at some points. The sensitive locations memo restricted them from doing that. But in so doing, created safe space and unsafe space, thereby incarcerating.

CT: I'm wondering if you could expand on this resistance, this quality of resistance that this Sanctuary Movement has had and maybe should still have? And maybe this is leading into another [if we] lost a certain degree of radicality, how do we recapture that?

CRM: [What] I'm trying to do is less sort of like, 'okay, answer the question of how do we recapture the radical nature of the Sanctuary Movement.' As a scholar, I'm less invested in those sort of questions than an activist would be. Not to say that the two things can't be combined. For me though, what I think, the questions that I ask and the questions that I hope might be able to get activists to think about exactly the question that you asked is, 'when we think about religion, like we lose sight of the categories that we hold dear,' right? Such as for example, for some people that might be religion and the sacrality of the church as a space. That the state is also aware of the role of religion in society. And the state can also use that to limit the mobility of migrants.

And so I guess I don't have a direct answer to like the how, how can we return to the radical nature of the sanctuary movement? But I think at least step one is to think about how what we're doing, be critical about what we're doing. Providing sanctuary is also an extension of the carceral state. Well, I think the sensitive locations memo might begin to enter those questions. And maybe churches, and I'm not saying, my claim is not the churches should not provide sanctuary; I think they have been incredibly valuable over the past four years and over the past decades. But I think being aware of that at least might provide avenues of future action that can be a bit more, that we're not, you're not just simply sort of like by the rules of the game as they have been established by immigration agencies.

CT: You mentioned scholarly thinking, activist thinking. We kind of talked about this, but how can higher education or academia contribute to the Sanctuary Movement as a religious, socially

motivated, politically motivated movement? Or how do you bridge potential gaps between the academic community and migrant communities? Is that something you're like grappling with?

CRM: So it's not something that I'm grappling, but I think I do have a pretty solid and straightforward answer. It comes down to just how far are you willing to go to actually resist? So for example, with the rise of the Trump administration four years ago, or over four years ago, a lot of campuses across the country declaring themselves sanctuary campuses: ICE will not operate here. And I think that that's an important symbolic gesture. I don't think it's necessarily empty, right? I'm glad that colleges are speaking out. But, again think back to the sensitive locations memo, schools are already protection. Just as churches were part of that sensitive locations memo, so too are schools. So in some ways, the campus declaring themselves a sanctuary campus didn't actually do anything other than just sort of like, well, it was, ICE wasn't going to go there anyway because it was already within sensitive locations memo. And sort of like important symbolic value for students who are undocumented. But if you think about the actual implications, whether or not it was a sanctuary campus or not officially declared, ICE was unlikely to go there the first place.

However, if I think about what schools can actually do? So for example, there are fellowships that are restricted to US citizens. I think one of the, at Iowa, I'll give you a personal example: I'm a DACA recipient. At Iowa I was nominated for a fellowship through the university that I was not able to receive because it was for US citizens only. And so, even though like I had grown up here, and so you have these DACA, there are sort of, there are ways in which... And I'm not pretty privileged because I have DACA. So that's just one small example.

But there are thousands of undocumented immigrants who don't even have DACA that can't apply for federal aid. I think those are the circumstances in which universities can really put their money where their mouth is and sort of recognize the ways in which undocumented students are left out of these broader support structures and actually support in radical ways like full tuition scholarships. Or, what I'm trying to say that there are there are ways in which actually funneling resources to people who would not otherwise have resources counts a lot more than declaring yourself a sanctuary campus.

CT: I'm curious about the word 'economy' and like the economic framework of economic migrants and how our economy shapes how we treat people. Like just generally capitalism is like, you know, the cause of a lot of exploitation and suffering. So the place of faith within I guess our capitalistic society. I'm thinking of prisons too, very big question. But [**CRM:** yeah.] yeah.

CRM: That's a very serious thought to economic migrants. Like obviously I know it's consequential, but I think, you know, if you ever want to develop yourself, that would be a very interesting project about how we think about migrants.

But I think, to keep it sort of to the point, one of the things that I find frustrating and not very productive about, sometimes you get into debates of like: what should our immigration policies be? And you, sometimes you hear vary with like progressive, well-meaning people that are in favor of progressive immigration reform make the argument of like, 'well, immigrants are good for the economy, right? They start businesses, or they fill jobs that Americans aren't filling.' You share these economic [arguments] about why it's a good, it's a beneficial thing economically to bring in migrants. And sort of, I think there is some value in that and in some contexts, right? Some people might use and you might be able to convey. But I think ultimately, it's not very fruitful argument because it should not be about like should we welcome migrants because of the economic value that they bring to the table. And at what point are we actually, we should be talking about like 'well we should be welcoming migrants because it is the right thing to do when somebody.' People don't just migrate here. When they migrate here, it's for a very compelling reason. You uproot your family and your life. And so like providing opportunities for people to come here for whatever reason because they have inherent dignity. Those should be the reasons and not just the economic ones. And that's where I think sort of spiritual, religious, and faith traditions can step in to give us alternative modes of thinking about why we should have more welcoming immigration policies that aren't just about the economic value that migrants bring to the table.

Just to readdress it like, yeah, governments tend to sort of think about migrants and sort of define them in terms of their economic issue and in terms of their economic value. But I think different with spiritual and faith traditions give us alternative language that doesn't hinge on the inherent - or the economic value of migration.

KL: Yeah. Speaking of the New Sanctuary Movement, I think just as a kind of even more bigger picture question: do you think, how do you think the New Sanctuary Movement will play in the goal of a more comprehensive immigration reform policy in the US. And do you think the NSM should kind of try to readopt its aims to kind of go along with your idea of radical resistance to the state or do you think the NSM is currently in a good spot and should just continue what it's already doing, I guess?

CRM: I think it's hard to make, to talk about the New Sanctuary Movement as a unified movement. Like I think when we think of the Sanctuary Movement in the '80s and the unified - and the New Sanctuary Movement since the early 2000s, these are just place holder terms, right? These are when I say New Sanctuary Movement, there might be organizations that sort of see themselves as part of the Sanctuary Movement, but it's not one unified thing. It's not like it's one

organization pulling all of the strings. It's sort of like a collection of different churches and different peoples attempting to lean into a tradition. So it's not one unified thing.

So to say like 'should it continue or should it change course' is difficult. I think we should be conscious that it's very diverse and loose that we sort of give a name to it as a broad descriptor. I think it can, I think something that it can do though, relating back to if, relating back to your previous comment of how people that go into sanctuary tend to be people who have winnable cases or relatable cases to a broader American public. That is one of the ways that the Sanctuary Movement I think can sometimes be sort of harmful. Again, I want to hold the tension between yes, it provides immediate relief for people that need it, right? But also harmful in the sense that you play into the tropes of like the good versus bad immigrant, right?

So for example, Alex Garcia's. A lot of the framing around his case was around the fact that he had been here for a long time, was hard-working, had kids, and ultimately one thing that was prominent that he was married to and is, one thing that was very prominent in the discourse around his case was that he was married to an American citizen and his kids were American citizens, and that's why, you know, he should be provided relief. And so one, in one sense, that's a very smart strategy to bring relief to Alex because that is what is going to be palatable for politicians and agencies and the broader public. In another sense, it's harmful because you are still sort of like filtering and saying 'Alex is worthy because his marriage to a citizen wife and the fact that he is a family man and brings economic value to the table,' which I think again, we think about like, [it] plays into these good immigrant versus bad immigrant binaries and sort of in some ways reverts back to the economic benefit of migrants. When I think this is a good opportunity for religious entities to sort of reimagine new ways of talking about why immigrants are deserving of relief or opportunity, not just on the basis of their marriage to a citizen or based on the economic value that they bring.

KL: Thank you so much for all of your answers, Carlos. We really appreciated the time you took to kind of answer these questions in detail, even if they're very, very challenging and pretty hard to answer in any definitive way. We really appreciate your time and your participation in the interview, and we hope your research progresses smoothly. Thank you so much.