

Have y'all ever heard of "Ugly Laws?" These "unsightly beggar ordinances" started in San Francisco in 1867 and spread across the country. Ugly Laws made it illegal for "any person, who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or deformed in any way, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, to expose himself or herself to public view."¹ In other words, if you looked different enough, you had to stay home or face imprisonment and fines. The last of these laws finally got repealed in 1974, but the thinking behind them remains, an intense mix of ableism, eugenics, snobbery, and highly targeted marginalism. We don't have Ugly Laws anymore, but we haven't exactly abandoned the idea, either. Legislatively, we've just changed who the government considers "ugly" based on all sorts of assumptions and, sometimes, outright lies. Could be brown skin or tattoos. Could be the clothes someone chooses to wear. Could be using a bathroom someone else thinks you don't look like you should be able to use. Of course, one of the many problems with all of this is that it's completely subjective. When is a tan too dark? When is a neighbor a threat? When is a tattoo just a tattoo?

All that to say, instead of feeding God's sheep these days, many Christians rationalize why God didn't mean *those* sheep, whoever *those* sheep are. Trans, foreign, courageous, opinionated, it doesn't matter. I suspect the diverse passions that give us our strength are called weak and corrupting in part because diversity is fascism's great weakness. But yeah, Jesus said feed my sheep. He didn't tell us to ask for work papers, prove the level of need, feed only the agreeable, polite, or like-minded. He told us to feed his sheep. Of course, feed my sheep doesn't just mean 'give 'em food.' It means 'care for all their needs.' But the way things are going, many are more interested in criminalizing them than feeding them.

Weirdly enough, this all makes me think about Paul. Now, Paul started out as Saul. If he'd had a birth certificate, the name history knows him by wouldn't've matched it. Saul's job was to persecute early Christians. As Acts puts it, he 'breathed threats and murder' against followers of Jesus. So Jesus knocked him off his high horse and called from heaven, "Why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" To be clear, this was after all the Crucifixion / Resurrection / Ascension stuff, so it's not the literal Jesus that Saul persecutes. He persecuted Jesus by mistreating his followers.

This is one of the single most significant conversion stories in the entire Bible, and it starts with a persecutor becoming a servant of Christ, an advocate for the poor, and an eventual martyr for the cause. Can you imagine an ICE agent converting? That's the level of change we're talking about. For those of us trying so hard to get people to act right, I wonder how readily we could accept a converted Saul if he'd spent the last three months with ICE? Just last week, ICE got permission to break into homes without a warrant.² In California, an Irish woman who's lived in the US legally for more than 30 years was detained after she returned from a visit to see her father with dementia.³ In Kansas, a woman was arrested when she appeared for an interview in her process to get a green card, and now she faces deportation.⁴ In Oklahoma, ICE invaded an American citizen's home, trashed her house, stole her life savings, and after failing to get her and her three daughters to change their clothes in front of them, made all of them stand outside in the front yard in their underwear.⁵ In Texas, detainees used their bodies to spell out a desperate S-O-S.⁶ At least seven people have

¹ <https://books.google.com/books?id=pXW69O5po3AC&pg=PA291#v=onepage&q&f=false>

² <https://www.thedailybeast.com/leaked-memo-donald-trumps-ice-breaking-into-homes-without-warrant/>

³ <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2025/04/27/irish-woman-living-legally-in-us-for-decades-detained-after-returning-from-visit-to-ireland-to-see-her-father/>

⁴ <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article304988381.html>

⁵ <https://kfor.com/news/local/were-citizens-oklahoma-city-family-traumatized-after-ice-raids-home-but-they-werent-suspects/>

⁶ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sos-migrants-texas-detention_n_68127b1ee4b014e5d48bceeb

died in ICE custody this year.⁷ And it's still not entirely clear where women and children scooped up by ICE are sent.⁸ Every time one of these stories comes out, it's real people suffering. And with each real person suffering, Jesus suffers, too. Every time someone from the underside is picked up, abused, or trafficked, we're picking up, abusing, and trafficking Jesus. Remember his words: "Just as you did to the least of these, you did to me. ... I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Meanwhile, the version of Saul that works for ICE does all this deporting while protecting the religion of choice. That's a religion that's arrested a pastor in prayer at the Capitol Rotunda,⁹ encouraged us to forget the separation of church and state,¹⁰ and fanned the flames of an anti-Christian witch hunt while acting rather anti-Christian themselves.¹¹ As the Catholic Church looks toward its conclave, the president joked that his name should be in the hat,¹² and then posted a photoshopped picture of himself wearing the pope's vestments on an official White House account two days after claiming he's been sent here by God.^{13,14} They're doing this under the auspices of "bringing religion back to our country," which is odd 'cause I don't see how it's ever left.¹⁵ What worries me is that what they're trying to justify doesn't cover my religion. Even if you agree with what they've done so far, this should frighten you. Christianity is only one religion, and it's got literally thousands of denominations. But they're only standing up for one kind of Christianity, or really, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, they're only standing up for the ways they can misapply our vocabulary to cloak their intentions under the auspices of a single kind of Christianity. Also, for all of US history, Christianity has been the largest religion in this country. We didn't need protecting but everyone that's not in that one kind of Christianity sure needs protecting now.

Thank God Saul converted. I mean, I've got my issues with who he became, but Christians gained an incredible ally in the converted Paul. And that actually gives me some hope, hope that all these atrocities will eventually pile up and exhaust some of those agents, lead them to realize the true nature of what they've done, get knocked off their high horse, nursed back into loving their neighbors, and maybe even grow into incredible allies, too. But in the meantime, while we keep pushing back, naming lines that ought not be crossed, addressing real people instead of scapegoated boogymen, we've got some serious sheep-feeding needs doing. And remember, "feed my sheep" means a whole lot more than just giving 'em food. It means seeing to all their needs, deserving, faithful, mean or not doesn't matter. As Fr. Steve puts it, Jesus said, "Feed my sheep," not "screen my sheep." That might sound a little Pollyanna, but the truth of it is the more sheep we feed, the more needs we'll find that need us. Living that indiscriminate care is exactly where conversion begins, because people can't help but see Christ in folks that act like Jesus. Make sure that's who they see. Jesus said, do you love me? Don't screen my sheep. Do you love me? Don't deport my sheep. Don't abuse my sheep. Don't make my sheep live in fear, but if you love me, feed my sheep.

⁷<https://english.elpais.com/usa/2025-05-05/lives-cut-short-in-ice-custody-seven-migrants-die-in-trumps-first-100-days.html>

⁸<https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/lifestyle-buzz/vanished-in-plain-sight-what-s-happening-to-the-women-and-children-taken-by-ice-in-2025/ar-AA1DeFP8>

⁹<https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/william-barber-trump-christian-task-force-b2741146.html>

¹⁰<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2025/05/donald-says-america-should-forget-about-the-separation-of-church-and-state/>

¹¹<https://www.axios.com/2025/05/01/christian-leaders-denounce-white-house-task-force>

¹²<https://www.thetimes.com/us/american-politics/article/trump-wants-to-be-pope-funeral-zb8687jsv>

¹³<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114441543826801216>

¹⁴<https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-national-day-of-prayer-biden-b2743307.html>

¹⁵<https://www.dailywire.com/news/trump-tells-church-leaders-were-bringing-religion-back-as-new-commission-forms>