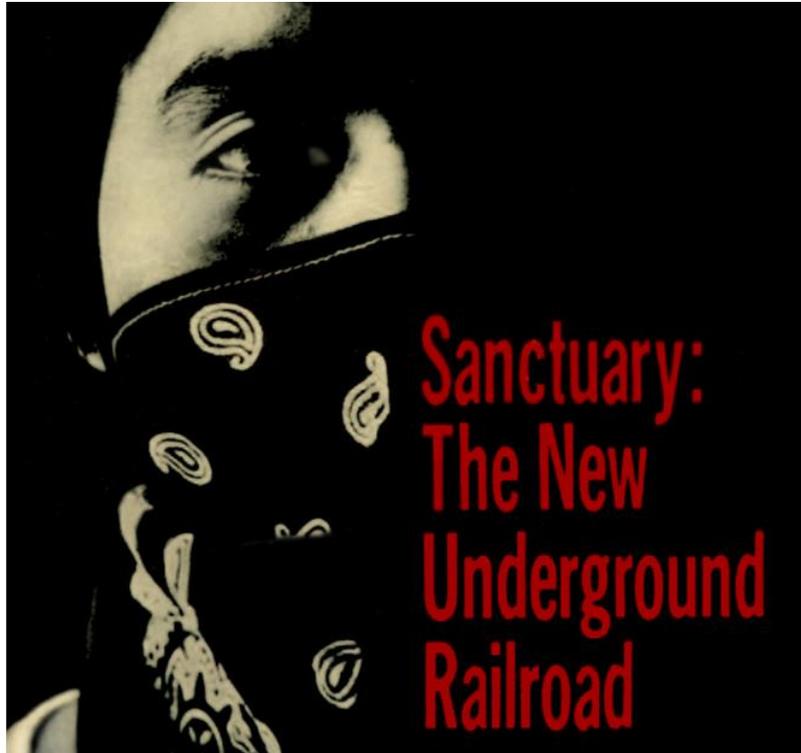


## SANCTUARY UNMASKED: THE FIRST TIME LOS ANGELES (SORT OF) BECAME A CITY OF REFUGE

Los Angeles Review of Books

*By Paul A. Kramer | October 25, 2020*



Before the Salvadoran soldiers started carrying American guns, and before a bomb took off her grandfather's leg, Alicia Rivera had not been interested in finding refuge in the United States. Born in 1959, she had grown up outside the town of Suchitoto — it means “bird and flower” in Nahuatl — with five younger siblings in a peasant family with a plot of good land. Her mother was from town, and had insisted that she get an expensive, Catholic school education, although they could barely pay for it. The nuns favored the richer, lighter-skinned girls, but she was studious and thrived defiantly, proving especially good at English.

Then, violence came. “The terror kept growing around us,” she recalls. Home to thousands of disinherited peasants, the region was a stronghold for guerrillas

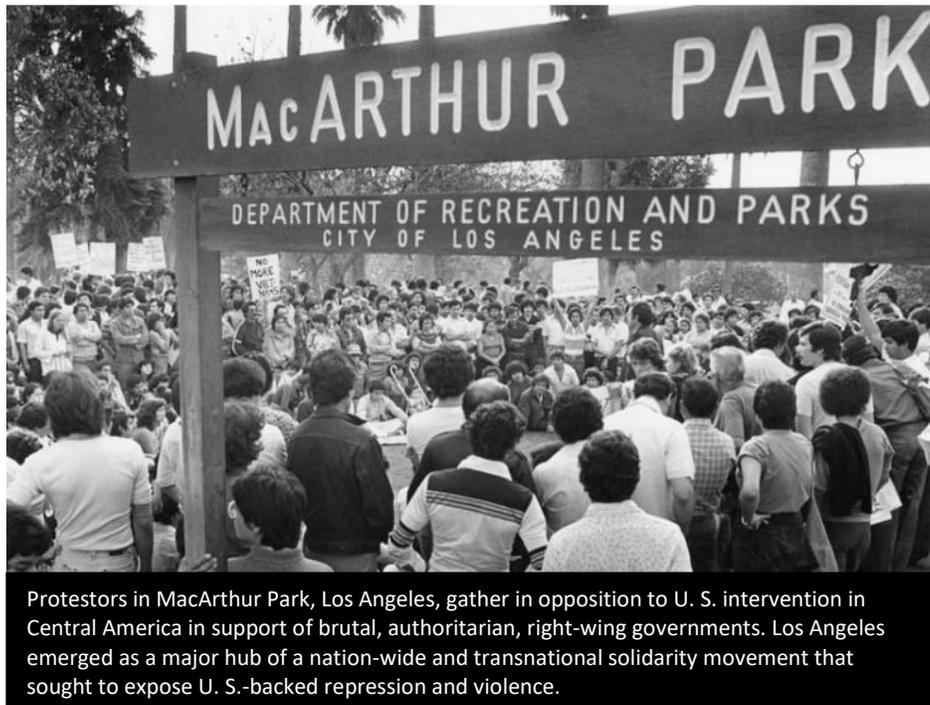
fighting the oligarchic Salvadoran state, and an epicenter of state brutality. A boy she knew, who had been involved with the guerrillas, went into hiding. He slipped home one evening, and found his mother, father, and brother slaughtered at the dinner table. Rivera's cousin disappeared. Her grandfather used his pull with a lieutenant-colonel, who let him search a truck loaded down with bodies. They found him, barely alive, tangled in a wire that had cut nearly to his bones.

Rivera decided to leave early in 1980. She was 21 years old. She had joined groups committed to Catholic social justice and had met Archbishop Óscar Romero. When a gunman aligned with the government shot him in the middle of a Sunday mass that March, she knew no one was safe.

**Los Angeles's Pico-Union district and adjoining Alvarado corridor near MacArthur Park hummed with life, a vibrant Central America in exile. Alicia Rivera joined a movement to transport and protect other refugees like herself: a movement for what activists were starting to call sanctuary.**

She made it to Los Angeles, where a cousin helped her get a job at Winchell Donuts, and she shared a crowded apartment with friends from home. Los Angeles's Pico-Union district and adjoining Alvarado corridor near MacArthur Park hummed with life, a vibrant Central America in exile. Vendors sold pupusas on the corners, and izote flowers out of their cars. Boomboxes pumped out cumbias and marimba music. Young men pulled televisions onto the stoops of cramped apartment buildings to watch soccer together on hot summer evenings. Trade union, student, and revolutionary activists from Central America

carried their fight against authoritarianism across borders: gathering, remembering, and sustaining long-distance solidarities. Refugee relief agencies set up shop. Rivera found work translating for one of them and was soon at the center of a movement to transport and protect other refugees like herself: a movement for what activists were starting to call sanctuary.



**Punishing sanctuary cities allowed Trump, all at once, to untether police, expel nonwhite immigrants, and spread culture-war disdain for progressive cities as sinks of crime and chaos.**

Since 2017, sanctuary cities have been on the receiving end of Donald Trump’s rage and persecution. His administration has threatened to withhold federal funding from them, to overwhelm them by busing in immigrants imprisoned at the border, and to dispatch SWAT-like Border Patrol teams to carry out raids. His reasons are not hard to make out. Punishing sanctuary cities allows him, all at once, to untether police, expel nonwhite immigrants, and spread culture-war disdain for progressive cities as sinks of crime and chaos.

Defying the administration, the L.A. City Council declared Los Angeles a sanctuary city in February 2019. Some dismissed the move as symbolic, but City Councilman Gilbert Cedillo, who was one of the proposers of the city’s sanctuary resolution, stressed that the act was “extremely significant” in the face of intensifying ICE raids that terrified local residents. The resolution “set the tone for

the way we want our residents to be treated, with dignity and respect regardless of their immigration status,” he said.

But the journey to the city’s statement had been long, and to some the announcement, while welcome, had come too late to meaningfully dent Trump’s anti-immigrant machinery. After all, by this point, the state of California had already approved legislation preventing local law enforcement from providing resources to federal immigration authorities. The word “sanctuary” appeared nowhere in the law — called the California Values Act — but it was generally called California’s state sanctuary law.

Resisting pressure from activists, Mayor Eric Garcetti had said Los Angeles could protect immigrants’ rights and frustrate the administration’s anti-immigrant designs without waving a sanctuary flag. For one thing, he said, the concept was legally amorphous. In pursuit of clarity, Garcetti and his advisors had asked the Trump administration for their technical, legal definition of the term that they would be using. But they were only told that sanctuary cities were wrong and would be sanctioned, and that sanctuary’s official definition, not yet available, would be forthcoming.



Activists protesting in defense of immigrant rights in Los Angeles in opposition to the Trump administration’s nativist agenda, November 2019. Earlier that year, the City Council declared Los Angeles a sanctuary city but not, as it turned out, for the first time.

Some people thought that Los Angeles was *already* a sanctuary city. They cited the LAPD's longstanding Special Order 40, which barred police officers from investigating matters relating strictly to immigration status, or reporting an undocumented immigrant who had been the victim of a crime to federal law enforcement. Under the order, officers would not initiate police actions with the goal of discovering immigration status, nor arrest or book suspects solely for illegal entry into the country. Police officers would only report undocumented immigrants to the INS when they were booked for multiple misdemeanors, a high-grade misdemeanor, or a felony; or if they'd been arrested for similar offenses before. To some observers, Special Order 40 amounted to sanctuary, but for others, it fell short, for better or worse. No one knew for sure, but many people had strong opinions.

**When campaigners pushed to declare Los Angeles a sanctuary city, some people thought that L. A. was already sanctuary city. Los Angeles had indeed openly declared itself a sanctuary city, briefly, once before, in late 1985. But something unexpected had happened.**

The uncertainty may have been, at least partly, the stubborn legacy of a strange, remarkable, buried episode. Los Angeles had indeed openly declared itself a sanctuary city, briefly, once before. In the mid-1980s, at the height of a refugee influx from Central America, sanctuary activists had successfully pressured the Los Angeles City Council to affirm the separation of policing and immigration enforcement, and apply it to all city employees. On November 23, 1985, the Council narrowly passed an ambitious sanctuary resolution, the first of the United States' largest cities to do so up to that point. Campaigners for refugee and immigrant rights across the country hailed the victory.

But something unexpected happened. Anti-immigrant political leaders stoked a popular backlash, whipping up frenzied hostility against immigrants as competitors and parasites, permanent outsiders and enemies of society itself. Sanctuary supporters on the Council, blindsided, had beaten a tactical retreat. They managed to preserve the resolution's buffer between the INS, police officers, and other civil servants, but they undeclared sanctuary.

What remained after the storm cleared was *like* a sanctuary city, but less: a fog that, decades later, still shrouded Los Angeles's exact location on the fragile map of immigrant welcome and safety. Was a city still a sanctuary if it didn't allow itself to say so?

Los Angeles's first sanctuary law grew out of the refugee wave that had brought Alicia Rivera to the city. By 1982, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 refugees from El Salvador — a country with fewer than 5,000,000 people — and tens of thousands of Guatemalans had fled to the United States to escape murder, poverty, and starvation. The 1980 Refugee Act codified a right to asylum for those with a “well-founded fear” of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or group membership. Migrants from El Salvador and Guatemala discovered their applications were almost always turned down, even as the doors were thrown open to refugees fleeing communist regimes.

The refusals had everything to do with US military and political intervention in Central America. Since the end of the 1970s, a popular leftist insurgency had challenged El Salvador's predatory oligarchy. American intelligence suggested that

**The United States was implicated in the violence that had uprooted Alicia and hundreds of thousands of other Central American refugees. The US Army trained three elite Salvadoran battalions at forts and bases in North Carolina, Georgia, Panama, and Honduras, then sent them home with sophisticated weapons. At least one of the brigades, the Atlacatl Battalion, massacred hundreds of civilians.**

guerrillas had received training and arms from the Soviets and Cubans, although the extent of that assistance would later be disputed. The Carter and Reagan administrations viewed the civil war through a Cold War lens, casting Salvadoran insurgents as Soviet proxies.

As the Salvadoran military and right-wing death squads terrorized the population, US military and economic aid poured into the country, bolstering the regime. The US Army trained three elite Salvadoran battalions at forts and bases in North Carolina, Georgia, Panama, and

Honduras, then sent them home with Huey helicopters, 105mm artillery guns, and A-37 Dragonfly jets that dropped 500-pound bombs. At least one of the brigades, the Atlacatl Battalion, massacred hundreds of civilians.

Asylum-seekers' testimony about the violence could undermine political support for these authoritarian regimes: if US officials accepted migrants' claims that they had well-founded fears of their own governments, it would undercut their rationales for arming and training those same governments, and their rosy assertions that state-sponsored terror — if it had ever taken place — was steadily declining.

To minimize grants of asylum, INS and State Department officials set the bar impossibly high: Central American applicants had to submit proof of direct, individualized danger that far outstripped the usual asylum standards. Ricardo Ernandes, a young union organizer, had been shot at three times in El Salvador;



Central American migrants being deported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service from the Los Angeles airport aboard regularly-scheduled flights. Santana Chirino Amaya, a 24-year old man deported to El Salvador, was found beheaded. State Department officials claimed that no one facing danger at home was being deported.

when his cousin was killed by men carrying government guns, they had left a note on his chest saying they had intended to kill Ernandes. It wasn't enough. A US judge turned down his asylum request.

Meanwhile, US officials ramped up deportation, pressuring migrants into signing "voluntary departure" forms, then expelling them. Sometimes the officials lied. A minister active in refugee work reported that an INS official had told a girl she must sign the form if she didn't have a lawyer. Another girl had been told she was signing a laundry ticket.

The result was a ruthless deportation machine, at odds with US and international law but well aligned with Cold War priorities. Of the more than 6,000 petitions for asylum by Salvadorans in 1981, only 154 were considered, and only two granted. That same year, just over 1,000 Salvadorans were deported. By 1986, nearly 50,000 people had been forced to return.

Some of them did not survive. Refugees in Los Angeles kept alive the memory of Santana Chirino Amaya, a 24-year-old man from Amapulapa, San Vicente. He had been deported from the United States, then managed to return. But he'd been caught and deported a second time, in June 1981. Later that summer, his headless body was found in a shallow grave.

**Sanctuary activists built a network of shelters — “sanctuaries,” they called them — through which refugees could be channeled away from the border and into busy, anonymous cities and small, interior towns with a thin INS presence. By fall 1985, around 300 institutions, mostly churches and temples, had signed on.**

Activists called it the second underground railroad. By the early 1980s, hundreds of religious, immigrant, and refugee aid organizations, initially along the US-Mexico border, then nationally, began taking a daring, controversial step. They built a network of shelters — “sanctuaries,” they called them — through which refugees could be channeled away from the border and into busy, anonymous cities and small, interior towns with a thin INS presence. They'd be provided housing, food, clothing, and legal assistance as they searched for safety and navigated the complex, dismaying, discriminatory asylum process. By fall 1985, around 300 institutions, mostly churches and

temples, had signed on, including ones affiliated with most mainline Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church, and conservative and reform Judaism. Los Angeles's First Unitarian Church in Pico-Union had been the first church in the city to publicly declare it was taking in Central American refugees under the sanctuary banner.

Congregations debating whether to join the effort by providing potentially unlawful, church-based shelter and other supports were compelled to grapple with questions of law and civil disobedience, secrecy and advocacy, complicity and empire, and to let these questions cross the borders of their everyday lives. In their deliberations, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations invoked the “cities of refuge” established in the Old Testament, where those fleeing blood revenge for an unintentional killing could find protection, and cited the Catholic Church’s long history of sheltering fugitives escaping arrest.

They turned to the Bible for guidance. There was Leviticus 19:33: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” Christian congregations made sense of their obligations to refugees with Matthew 25:35–36: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

The movement sparked charged debate from the outset. Its opponents accused it of organized law-breaking, and naïvely accepting and exaggerating migrants’ accounts of political persecution at home. They said activists should dedicate their energies to filing asylum claims through the system, which was fair and functioning. Some said there was no tradition of “sanctuary” in American law.

Sanctuary activists countered that the asylum system was patently biased along Cold War lines. A Polish merchant seaman who jumped ship fleeing communism could be given asylum within 48 hours, while Salvadorans like Rivera, fleeing a US-backed government, were imprisoned for months, then deported.

When it came to historical precedent, they pointed to the sanctuary history most American children learned about in elementary school, the network of shelters that provided refuge to Black people escaping slavery, and “personal liberty laws” initiated by Northern states’ governments to protect them from recapture under the Fugitive Slave Acts.

The movement's signature tactic involved refugees testifying in public about the violence they had escaped, and which threatened their families and communities. "The Sanctuary concept was to confront, as well as to help," Reverend Teresa Santillana, a sanctuary activist, put it later. When they spoke publicly, most refugee witnesses insisted on remaining anonymous, usually tying bandanas or other coverings across their noses and mouths.

Some wore masks. Refugee activists' families back home faced violent reprisal, and everyone knew that agents of the Salvadoran state in the United States, and US government officials, were paying attention. When refugee witnesses appeared on



Masked activists in Chicago at a church service. Refugees involved in solidarity and sanctuary activism—much of it organized in and through houses of worship—wore masks or bandanas out of a fear of arrest and deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or the targeting of their families back in Central America.

front pages and news broadcasts, the masks spoke, too: of danger and fear, the courage to speak out, and the need to remain veiled.

Some activists embraced still more confrontational tactics. INS deportation flights left Los Angeles regularly, which is where the Women of Conscience came in. Just over a decade into a feminist revolution, many women in the sanctuary movement rejected the presumption — evident in the behavior of some male leaders — that the campaign needed men in charge. That spring, a small group of devout, church-

affiliated women — just six at first, then 22 by that fall — formed their own, independent, direct-action cadre: nuns, deacons, and religious social service workers, some of them new to the fight, some seasoned activists. Cynthia Anderson, a social worker who had introduced Alicia Rivera to the sanctuary movement, was a ringleader.

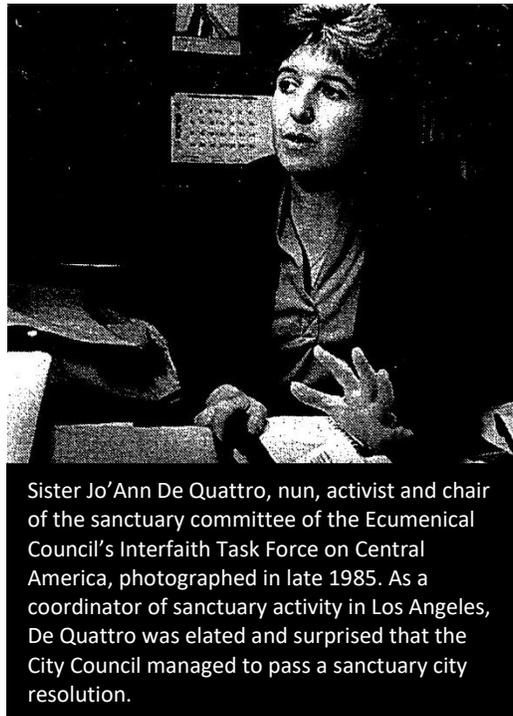


Female sanctuary activists in Los Angeles, mostly church-based, and frustrated with male-dominated sanctuary leadership, formed a direct-action group called "Women of Conscience" that tried to stop deportations—and grab headlines—by putting their bodies in the way of INS buses carrying deportees to the airport.

On September 16, 1981, 11 women — five nuns, and Episcopal and Roman Catholic laywomen — blocked the driveway of a federal building where immigrants were being detained and refused to move. The police pushed the women aside, but they came back. Police officers arrested them, not for the last time. "It's a very touchy situation, moving these church ladies around," said one policeman. The protestors had no illusions that they would prevent the deportations — the INS found a way — but the disruptions drew journalists. Sister Paulita Bernuy told a reporter that, as an otherwise law-abiding woman of 52, civil disobedience had not come easily. "I was scared to death to even think of it," she said. "But doing this bonds me a lot with people who live in fear — and with those who've moved beyond that."

At the center of the Los Angeles movement, seemingly everywhere, was Sister Jo'Ann De Quattro. She was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to an Irish-Italian family with an activist past, and raised in California, where she became a nun. On sabbatical at a Mexican American cultural center in San Antonio, she learned that three North American nuns and another missionary had been murdered in El Salvador. The news transformed her. "I cannot live my life as usual now," she remembers thinking.

De Quattro returned to Los Angeles and joined religious and secular activists as ever more refugees streamed into the city. Chairing the city's Interfaith Task Force on Central America, she promoted public sanctuary: churches would openly announce that they sheltered refugees, risking legal action and public outrage. "Even the more liberal of the male clerics of different denominations were too chicken to do it," she said. "And so I said, 'I'll do it.'"



Sister Jo'Ann De Quattro, nun, activist and chair of the sanctuary committee of the Ecumenical Council's Interfaith Task Force on Central America, photographed in late 1985. As a coordinator of sanctuary activity in Los Angeles, De Quattro was elated and surprised that the City Council managed to pass a sanctuary city resolution.

De Quattro proved a skilled, unrelenting organizer. She gathered a broad coalition of Los Angeles faith communities whose members declared their churches and temples sanctuaries. She cultivated ties between Anglo and Central American activists, and helped organize an investigative trip to Honduras, the base of US military power in Central America. The group was barred from entering and flew on to Washington instead to "see if we could rattle some cages in Congress." Some activists were taken aback by her vocation. "The stereotype of a nun," she said, was "not somebody who is necessarily doing what we were doing."

She was also a forceful media presence. In June 1985, she spoke out at a press conference in defense of hunger-striking immigrant prisoners who fought horrific conditions at the prison at El Centro, about 200 miles southeast of the city, that held thousands of migrants awaiting processing or deportation. The men charged that they had been forced to stand outside for up to 14 hours a day in scorching, 120-degree heat, and locked in solitary confinement if they refused to sign “voluntary departure” forms. Riot-equipped INS officers broke up the peaceful protest, beating the strikers with batons and, according to Jose Ramirez Flores from El Salvador, tied their wrists “so tight they stopped circulation to our hands.” INS Commissioner Alan Nelson defended the officers’ actions, insisting that “you must remember this is a detention facility.” Speaking at the press conference, De Quattro was indignant. El Centro was “not a detention facility,” she shot back. It was a “concentration camp.”

**While newscasters called the Central Americans “mere economic refugees,” Sister JoAnn De Quattro rejected the term. “When a mother cannot get food for her child, that’s not a mere economic refugee,” she said. “She is trying to keep her child alive.”**

On another occasion, a newscaster speaking with De Quattro called Central Americans “mere economic refugees.” She refused the term. She thought of women she’d watched in a displaced persons camp in Central America, as they struggled to feed their children, cooking whatever food they could gather over a fire. “I said, there is no such thing as a *mere* economic refugee,” she recalled. “When a mother cannot get food for her child, that’s not a *mere* economic refugee. She is trying to keep her child alive.”

Most everyone agreed that Harold Ezell, the INS’s fervent Western regional director, was the West Coast sanctuary movement’s nemesis. (“We had the most wonderful opponent,” De Quattro remembered, chuckling.) The son of an Assembly of God minister, Ezell had climbed the ranks to an executive post at Der Wienerschnitzel International, a hot-dog chain, and become a close ally of Governor Ronald Reagan. When Reagan was elected president, he was rewarded for his support. In 1983, having never held public office,

he was appointed head of the INS's 3,000-person Western division, which covered the heart of the Central American migration.

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Soon Ezell had managed to build a national platform for himself, opposing what, according to the Los Angeles Times, he considered "America's most insidious enemy: the illegal alien." Frustrated that Americans failed to recognize the danger, he spread moral panic. Immigrants, he insisted, were the root of crime, drugs, unemployment, and welfare abuse in the United States.

In his zeal to rescue the nation from this neglected threat, Ezell issued national policy statements without permission from higher-level officials. He initiated covert investigations of sanctuary activists, hiring spies to wiretap public church services, an apparent first for the federal government. On threadbare evidence, he accused sanctuary activists — he called

them "minority rights people" — of conspiring with immigrant-smuggling rings. (On this point, sanctuary leader Eugene Boutilier was incredulous. "Why would we recruit aliens to come here?" he asked. "Life is no bed of roses here for anyone from Central America.") As INS regional director, Ezell required that detained immigrant children be released only to their parents or legal guardians, a move that activists criticized as the INS's use of children as bait.

And he advertised his efforts through savvy media campaigns. He toured the border with reporters, and staged dramatic press conferences, where he launched bold, headline-grabbing claims unburdened by facts, raged about immigrants' corrosive impact on society, and condemned the sanctuary movement's activities as criminal and un-American. He wildly exaggerated immigrants' numbers and, when called on

it, seemed unbothered. Recounting one such incident, the Los Angeles Times noted that Ezell was “not known for his precision.”

Ezell anchored his crusade in Americanism and Christianity, but not without an uneasy defensiveness. “A lot of people accuse us of being kind of flag-wavers in the INS,” he told 4,000 newly naturalized citizens at a mass ceremony at the Los Angeles Convention Center in late 1983. “But a flag represents thousands of people. Don’t ever be ashamed of being a flag-waver!” He labored to take back patriotic images not usually associated with deportation, brandishing a miniature Statue of Liberty at the ceremony and wearing an electric lapel pin of the icon with a diamond torch that lit up when you touched it. People had asked Ezell how a minister’s son like himself could be so hardline against immigrants enough times that he’d developed what for him counted as a quip. “The Bible tells you to obey laws,” he would say.



Howard Ezell, Ronald Reagan’s appointee for the Western director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, presides over a naturalization ceremony in late 1985. A former hot-dog chain executive, Ezell made a name for himself nationally by demonizing immigrants and the sanctuary movement, even as he sought to reclaim immigrant-associated images like the Statue of Liberty.

What most characterized Ezell’s approach — striking in light of US military and economic power — was his unwavering sense of the United States as besieged and victimized, especially by immigrants. It was true that the US had once encouraged some in-migration, he admitted, but times had changed. “We’re not out recruiting people to develop our resources anymore,” he said. “Instead, our resources are being depleted...” The bumper sticker he had posted in his office said it all: “The Indians

had bad immigration laws.” Illegal immigration would “destroy what we know as a free society” within the decade unless the people took action. “Someday the citizenry is going to be fed up,” he said, near-quoting Peter Finch’s raging, desperate news anchor from the movie *Network*, who had urged viewers to stick their heads out of their windows and shout: “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore.”

**Alicia Rivera emerged as one of the sanctuary movement’s most stirring speakers, first in Los Angeles, then on a national stage. “There was something that just told me that I had to speak up,” she recalled, “because I heard the people crying in my mind and being killed.”**

As the sanctuary movement grew, Alicia Rivera emerged as one of its most stirring speakers, first in Los Angeles, then on a national stage. “There was something that just told me that I had to speak up,” she recalled, “because I heard the people crying in my mind and being killed.” Despite searing memories, she spoke at hundreds of venues, from church pulpits to *60 Minutes*. She appeared in televised debates with high-ranking federal officials, including Ezell. They once clashed on a Los Angeles public affairs program. Rivera’s husband at the time, Bruce Bowman, an immigration attorney, remembers

Ezell saying, “Illegals are all over. This young lady might be one!”

Rivera also faced off against the State Department’s point person on Central American refugee policy, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Elliott Abrams, in an interview with Charlie Rose in 1983. Abrams was in the middle of delivering the agency’s standard-issue defense of US policy — that El Salvador was overpopulated, that nearly all those fleeing to the United States were “economic migrants,” not refugees, and that the Department was granting asylum in those few cases where political “targeting” could be demonstrated — when Rivera cut him off.

“You want written proof that I’ve been persecuted?” she asked. “You want a signed thing from the government that says that I have been persecuted and that they killed my priest?”

Abrams objected. Rivera kept going. “We cannot get that kind of proof in El Salvador,” she said. Reading or clipping a newspaper, or “even having a Bible,” was considered subversive by the Salvadoran state, and could get you killed.

Abrams protested that written proof wasn’t required, especially from the Salvadoran government. When it came to Rivera’s charge of widespread, brutal, political repression, he replied that there were many more people in El Salvador who were not being repressed. “We’ve had cases where someone says, ‘My brother was killed,’” he said. “Now that sounds very persuasive. You go back and find out there



Alicia Rivera, a refugee, activist and speaker who fled violence in El Salvador, confronts a State Department official on the Charlie Rose Show. Despite her own precious status, she committed to speak out in defense of refugee rights and the sanctuary movement, against misleading claims by the Reagan administration of non-involvement in Central American state violence, and fair asylum processes for refugees from the region.

are seven more brothers, they are living in El Salvador, and they’re not being persecuted.”

Rivera wasn’t giving up. “We don’t qualify for asylum,” she said, “only because the repression and the massacres that are being carried on in El Salvador are supported by the US government.”

Now Abrams interrupted. “Well, we don’t support repression and we don’t support massacres,” he said.

Rivera continued. If US officials granted asylum to Salvadorans, “they would be contradicting themselves.”

Abrams parried that the State Department provided asylum to people from “dozens and dozens of friendly governments, including El Salvador —”

“Friendly governments,” she deadpanned.

Rivera conveyed intense calm during these conflicts, but her face masked inner terror, she recalled later. She could successfully counter top officials' false claims that El Salvador was safe, that migrants' fears were groundless, and that US asylum decisions were fair — in a language she was still making her own — and they could still just deport her.

The campaign to force American cities to separate immigration enforcement from policing and other public functions began small. Beginning in early 1985, advocates championed a handful of municipal ordinances that promised refugees and some immigrants freedom from status checks by public officials and, especially, police non-compliance with the INS in discretionary immigration and deportation matters. The effort took off first in progressive, college-town enclaves with networks of antiwar and solidarity activism. But that same year also saw big-city mayors issue executive orders that distanced municipal governments from the INS.

The policies and paths to them varied, and so did the names they were given, where they were named at all. Cities of refuge, they were called, cities of sanctuary, sanctuary cities. Designating them in this way made them something more than mere regulations. It elevated the policies to a level of principle (a somewhat open-ended principle) and fastened them to a city's moral and political identity. A sanctuary city wasn't just something that you did as a city; it was a part of who you were. Reverend Gustav Schultz, a Lutheran minister and sanctuary leader, hoped that sanctuary cities might remind the United States what it ought to be. They might “move toward pushing the country back to being a sanctuary as a whole.”

The term “sanctuary city,” by rhetorically linking municipal resolutions to the sanctuary movement, conveyed approval for activists' work. And, for better and worse, it gave the policies greater prominence. It helped refugees navigate toward pockets of relative safety. It also made these policies and the cities that embraced them big, visible targets.

Beginning in the summer of 1985, sanctuary activists pressured lawmakers to declare Los Angeles a sanctuary, and to guarantee city officials would not participate in immigration enforcement. Passing a City Council resolution in Los

Angeles — by far the largest US city in the United States to do so by that point — would boost the movement nationally. “Every proclamation, especially by an official entity, was an amazing and uplifting success,” Rivera recalled.

Los Angeles was not just anywhere. It was the country’s second largest city by population, home to its largest Latinx community, and a central hub of both the sanctuary movement and the INS. After El Salvador’s capital, it was home to more Salvadorans than any other city in the world. Los Angeles was where the forces struggling over what kind of nation the United States was and should be, and what the United States owed the people uprooted by the violence it supported, confronted each other with the greatest intensity.

For Sister Darlene Nicgorski, a sanctuary activist who had witnessed the brutality of US-backed Central American governments firsthand — and who would face conviction for sheltering refugees in violation of US immigration laws — the successful passage of sanctuary city resolution in Los Angeles “would send a sweeping message to both sides in the controversy.” If Los Angeles could make itself a sanctuary, maybe any place could.

**Idealistic incoming Councilmember Michael Woo thought a sanctuary city measure offering what he took to be an all-American pledge of protection for the oppressed would be an unobjectionable way to embark on his fledgling Council career. “A resolution that I thought could’ve been perceived as motherhood and apple pie,” he told me, “turned out to be much more controversial.”**

In the summer of 1985, activists reached out to Michael Woo, a young, newly elected city councilman. The methodical, idealistic 33-year-old politician had just defeated the incumbent in a run-off election, becoming the first Asian American to make it onto the Council, in a city that was six percent Asian American. Woo’s father, Wilbur Woo, a founder of the city’s first Chinese American bank and a force in Chinese American Republican circles, had instilled a sense of civic responsibility in him. But Mike Woo had taken a different path politically. Inspired by antiwar activism, he had gone to UC Santa Cruz, grown his hair long, and written left-

leaning columns in the student newspaper as “Citizen Woo.”

In his run for the L.A. City Council, Woo had reached out to a range of ethnic communities, activist organizations, and interest groups. His advisors concluded he had won by positioning himself as a pragmatic technocrat and representative of Los Angeles’s young, growing, multicultural middle class, with a vision for urban revitalization and cultural inclusion.

During the campaign, sanctuary activists had approached Woo through an intermediary, asking if he’d sponsor a sanctuary city resolution. The decision had not been difficult. His own family had a complex immigrant background. His father had been born in China with US citizenship, as his grandfather had been born in the United States. His mother Beth, also Chinese American, had been born in the US and educated in China, where his parents had met.

Mike Woo also knew something about refugees. During World War II, Beth and two children — Wilbur was in the United States attending UCLA — had fled Hong Kong as the Japanese army advanced. They lost everything. Woo, born in the United States after their reunion, had a stable, prosperous upbringing in 1950s Los Angeles, but his mother shared intimate, harrowing stories of violent uprooting and narrow escapes.

In taking up the cause, Woo felt assured that a sanctuary city resolution would build on established policies initiated by the LAPD itself. Six years earlier, on November 27, 1979, Chief of Police Daryl Gates had signed the department’s Special Order 40, which held that that “undocumented alien status in itself” was “not a matter for



Michael Woo, a 33-year old, newly-elected City Councilman—the first Asian-American elected to the Los Angeles City Council—led the legislative campaign for a sanctuary city resolution and successfully navigated it to a narrow passage. Given his understanding of the United States’ tradition of providing refuge to the oppressed, he was surprised at the success with which the issue was demagogued, and the backlash it prompted.

police action.” As its text explained, the order was practical. Law enforcement required “a high degree of cooperation” with a public that was becoming “more diverse,” with “substantial numbers of people from different ethnic and sociological backgrounds migrating to this City.” The order advanced the constitutional principle of equal protection for all. And because of their status, undocumented immigrants were “often more vulnerable to victimization,” and needed their access to the police defended.

Sanctuary activists did not think the matter should be left in the hands of the LAPD. Special Order 40 could be rescinded by the department at any point. And they charged, according to the *Times*, that the order had been “unevenly enforced” and that some refugees had been detained and turned over to the INS merely because of their immigration status. A sanctuary city resolution would codify Special Order 40 and remind other city departments that refugees, whether present legally or not, were entitled to city services without harassment. Backstopping the order was especially urgent in light of the LAPD’s heavy policing of the Central American neighborhoods of Pico-Union and MacArthur Park.

As for Woo, he thought a sanctuary city measure, grounded in existing LAPD policy, offering what he took to be an all-American pledge of protection for the oppressed, would be an unobjectionable way to embark on his fledgling Council career. “A resolution that I thought could’ve been perceived as motherhood and apple pie,” he told me, “turned out to be much more controversial.”

Woo, his staff and sanctuary activists drew up a coherent, workable plan that happened to be one of the boldest sanctuary city resolutions to that time. It placed Council backing behind Special Order 40. And it went further, directing all city employees, not just police officers, “to exclude refugee status as a consideration in their daily activities and routine dealings with the public,” with the proviso that this should not be understood as “sanctioning the violation of any law or encouraging interference in law enforcement efforts.”

The resolution also condemned the Reagan administration’s biased approach to refugee admissions and insisted that asylum be granted or denied “without

consideration of the relationship between the current Administration in this country and the current government in the refugee's country of origin." And it emphasized the resolution's intent to make it safer and easier for refugees to report crime and violations of building and safety codes, without fear of deportation. While Special Order 40 applied to all immigrants in the city, the resolution made clear that the sanctuary city policy applied only to refugees, and not to the city's larger immigrant community.

On November 23, just over two months after taking office, Woo presented the resolution to the Council. Sanctuary activists rose in a standing ovation, but Woo was cautious. He had counted the votes. Things looked favorable. But he sensed the issue was more contentious than he'd supposed, and he knew the positions of key players could change without warning. City Council aides had told activists "we're with you," but De Quattro remained wary. "We don't want 'probably,'" she said. "What would be disastrous would be a defeat of this proposal."

The next day, the Council convened in its august, marble-columned chamber, and deliberated for three charged hours. The hall that day was packed with over 400 sanctuary activists and a bank of television cameras, reflecting, for the *Times*, "the emotional atmosphere surrounding the sanctuary issue." Citizens were invited to testify, and it all poured out. What exactly did the resolution, and its sanctuary designation, actually mean? What kind of city did Los Angeles want to be, and who had a right to live there? What did the city — and the nation — owe the dispossessed from other countries?

Speaking in favor of the resolution, Manuel Marroquin, a Salvadoran refugee, submitted a pro-sanctuary petition signed by a thousand people. He testified that he had been denied asylum and would be killed if sent back. According to the *Times*, another speaker insisted that passing a sanctuary resolution meant "condoning terrorism" because "safe-houses where illegal aliens are harbored could be used to hide a cache of weapons."

Public officials spoke passionately on both sides, revealing, as Woo anticipated, just how tight the margins would be. Speaking in favor, Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky,

the son of Jewish immigrants, invoked the immigrant backgrounds of his Council colleagues by reciting their last names. There was no difference between the sanctuary that Los Angeles was offering refugees, he said, and earlier policies that had made immigrant-descended councilmembers a possibility. “This is a deeply emotional issue with me,” he told the chamber. His own parents had fled Russia in the 1920s, and his mother had arrived in the United States just months before the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, which severely restricted immigration, had gone into force.

**Robert Farrell was among the resolution’s firmest backers. When Farrell was a child, he and his family had left Louisiana for booming, postwar Los Angeles, along with tens of thousands of other Black Southerners seeking freedom, safety, and jobs. “I felt myself to be an immigrant to the Los Angeles area,” he told me.**

Robert Farrell was among the resolution’s firmest backers. He’d been on the committee that had drafted the sanctuary resolution, and did not think it had gone far enough. When Farrell was a child, he and his family had left Louisiana for booming, postwar Los Angeles, along with tens of thousands of other Black Southerners seeking freedom, safety, and jobs.

“I felt myself to be an immigrant to the Los Angeles area,” he told me, “moving out of a segregated environment to a less segregated environment to improve your quality of life and the life of your family.” If there had been a national border between Louisiana and Los Angeles in the late 1940s, he said, his family’s

situation would have been indistinguishable from that of the Central Americans currently fleeing to the city. Farrell was deeply involved in Black international politics, and noted that many Black migrants arriving to Los Angeles from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Belize were also being swept up in INS raids. “These folks are here,” he recalled thinking at the time. “What can we do to help?”

The resolution also faced vocal opponents, especially Ernani Bernardi, an older councilmember who represented a suburban area in the San Fernando Valley and often questioned the Council’s spending decisions. Bernardi said sanctuary would

require the city to violate federal law, a claim his opponents refuted. And apart from the sanctuary label, he said, there was nothing in the resolution the city wasn't already doing.

Ezell, seated at the central council table, blasted the proposal. Council minutes paraphrased him as saying that declaring Los Angeles a sanctuary, "regardless of the resolution's purpose or content," would "be received as an open invitation by the rest of the world to seek a better way of life in Los Angeles as a safe haven from the INS." The resolution would "intrude into a foreign policy issue" that could lead to a "massive influx of immigrants into Los Angeles, depletion of resources, and increased crime." Woo corrected him, stating the resolution's actual contents. Councilman Joel Wachs criticized Ezell for "fanning the flames of prejudice and hysteria."

The vote was taken, and it was close: 8-6 in favor. The vote tally was announced, and hundreds of sanctuary activists who had jammed the Council chambers shouted, cheered, and hugged. "I'm utterly amazed and elated," said De Quattro. But the backlash was immediate.

was "a signal to the refugees who are here among us that the LA City Council will be supportive of them and their presence here in order to try to eliminate their fear of deportation." Ezell was furious, telling a reporter that the resolution was a "real turkey," and an "absolute insult to federal officials."

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## **Council Votes 8-6 for L.A. Sanctuary**

**Symbolic Step for Central American  
Refugees Seen as Slap at U.S. Policy**

By VICTOR MERINA *Times Staff Writer*

A divided Los Angeles City Council, in a slap at the Reagan Administration's refugee policy, narrowly adopted a resolution Wednesday declaring the city a sanctuary for Central Americans fleeing political persecution and violence in their homelands.

want to live in." Woo said. "All of us are on the same boat. . . . It's important for us to get this message across."

Woo said the resolution would remove the "climate of fear" that pervades the refugee community and encourage refugees to report

Headline of Los Angeles Times' article recounting the City Council's passage of a sanctuary city resolution, November 28, 1985. Given the city's status as the second-largest metropolitan area in the country, its huge refugee population, and its proximity to the U. S.-Mexican border, the resolution's passage was hailed as a victory for sanctuary activists.

The decision made national news. “City Council Vote Gives Boost to National Movement,” read a headline in the Washington Post, which called it a “major victory.”

The backlash was immediate. Councilmembers who had supported the resolution got inundated with hostile calls and letters. Woo received a death threat. Ezell took to the airwaves. The resolution was an affront to federal power, he said, and would summon a flood of menacing immigrants into the city and the nation. Within minutes of the Council vote, he was threatening federal retaliation. Within days, he had instructed an INS attorney to look into the possibility of a federal lawsuit against the city. In December, he traveled to Washington to lobby congressional lawmakers who might sponsor legislation penalizing sanctuary cities by cutting off federal funds. “I think it’s ridiculous to thumb your nose at the federal government with one hand and then put your other hand out for a check,” he said. “That’s not the American way.”

**Looking back, Woo recalled his surprise at Ezell’s tactics. “I think it was an eye-opener for me in terms of seeing how it would be easy to demagogue an issue like this,” he said. But he pushed back.**

Looking back, Woo recalled his surprise at his opponents’ tactics. “I think it was an eye-opener for me in terms of seeing how it would be easy to demagogue an issue like this,” he said. But he pushed back. Five days after the vote, he took his case directly to the city in a reasoned, passionate editorial in the *Times*, headlined “City of Refuge is All-American.”

Woo’s article highlighted law and American values in an effort to capture the kinds of arguments that Ezell had trumpeted. Far from encouraging illegality, the resolution upheld the law. It opposed the deportation of “law-abiding” refugees, required city officials to comply with (rather than break) federal law, called on the INS to implement the 1980 Refugee Act as intended, and reinforced the LAPD’s Special Order 40.

The resolution, he wrote, also expressed traditional American values. The Pilgrims had been “the original boat people,” refugees who “fled their homeland in fear of

losing their lives because of their beliefs.” The generations of immigrants that followed them had created a society that stood as “a beacon of freedom and ethnic diversity for people around the world.”

Woo tackled the Reagan administration’s Cold War bias in asylum cases, insisting that “the traditional American ideal of providing refuge for those who fear persecution in their native lands” must apply to Salvadorans fleeing violence, as much as it did to “a Lithuanian sailor trying to jump ship in a US harbor” to escape communism. The sanctuary resolution was a “rational and compassionate response to a desperate situation.” Its proponents “did not challenge the system,” he wrote, but “reaffirmed the humane values upon which our country was founded.”

The letter did not slow the sanctuary movement’s adversaries, who were gaining momentum. On January 7, 1986, Bernardi announced a petition drive that would give voters the chance to revoke the sanctuary resolution on the fall ballot. The idea had come from individuals and organizations he declined to name, although he said he had conferred with Ezell. He also said that, based on the letters and phone calls he’d received, “there’d be no question of it passing.”

Here Bernardi cited the results of a telephone poll he’d commissioned. But the poll itself appears to have been misleading when it came to the actual contents of the resolution, asking citizens how they felt about Los Angeles declaring itself “a sanctuary city for illegal immigrants,” which the resolution, quite explicitly, did not do. Rather than accurately gather public opinion, the poll had intervened, falsely, in shaping it.

Woo felt the resolution could not survive the petition campaign which, he noted, was devolving into a “racially divisive” referendum on immigrants and refugees he feared would deepen the divisions he had hoped to bridge. “It would be disastrous for the city to have an initiative go on the ballot which would pit one ethnic group against another ethnic group and would exacerbate the tensions that are already out there in the community,” he said, even as he made clear he was not accusing Bernardi of racism.

On February 4, Woo approached Bernardi in the hallway and suggested a compromise. Bernardi made clear that “sanctuary” terminology was unacceptable. Woo fought hard to preserve the resolution’s substance.

A deal took shape. The Council would repeal the first resolution and pass another in its place. The new resolution would preserve the policy of non-interference by police and public officials in immigration matters. But Bernardi won the removal of the sanctuary label, and a new task force to report on immigrants’ fiscal impact on city services.

**Four days later — two months after the passage of the Council’s initial resolution — a resolution to undeclare Los Angeles a sanctuary city passed 11 to 1. A new resolution — protections without a name — was voted up unanimously. Woo was practical, calling the new law a “fair compromise.” He was not, he said, “willing to prolong the battle over that one word.”**

Four days later — two months after the passage of the Council’s initial resolution — a resolution to undeclare Los Angeles a sanctuary city passed 11 to 1. (Robert Farrell held out.) A new resolution — protections without a name — was voted up unanimously. Woo was practical, calling the new law a “fair compromise” that preserved “the gist of what was contained in the original resolution.” He was not, he said, “willing to prolong the battle over that one word.”

withdraw the word sanctuary from its resolution out of concern for the racist hysteria which was being provoked by critics of the resolution.”

De Quattro was disappointed. She’d hoped the movement could use the petition fight to raise awareness. Five refugee organizations issued a statement saying the Council had “acted to

Ezell said he felt pleased, but he had not escaped the episode unscathed. When he had barnstormed Washington, policymakers had mostly balked at his idea that the federal government should punish sanctuary cities. Speaking to a reporter, Ezell’s boss, national INS Commissioner Alan Nelson, treaded carefully. Ezell was doing a

fine job, he said, but “we obviously don’t want to be guilty of doing what we’ve criticized other people of doing: acting irrationally.”

Los Angeles’s sanctuary city resolution had risen, fallen, and come halfway back, unnamed. But it did not leave the city the same. Just a week after the passage of the first resolution, word had gone out that one of the city’s most prominent Catholic churches, the historic Iglesia de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles, would at last publicly declare itself a sanctuary, on December 12, the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

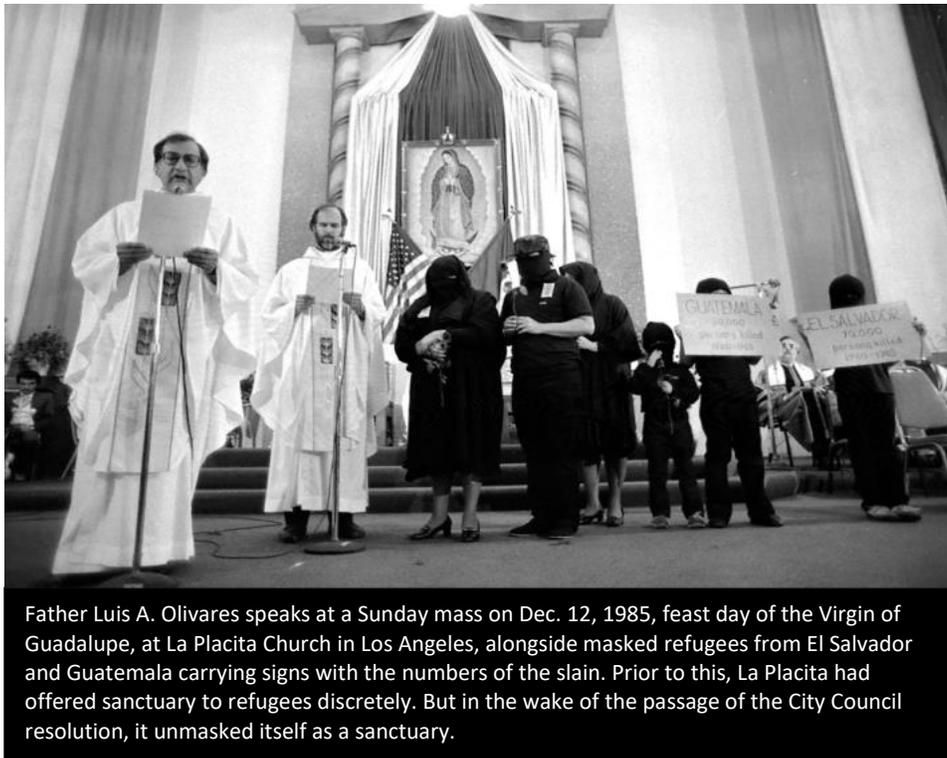
It was a triumph. The small but symbolically powerful church, raised in 1814 on the plaza at the city’s heart, drew more than 10,000 worshippers to Sunday mass, primarily Mexican Americans, but with growing numbers of Central Americans, many of them refugees. “We had people whose bodies were covered with scars,” recounted Father Mike Kennedy, who coordinated refugee work. The church’s activist pastor, Father Luis A. Olivares, had long been a passionate advocate of sanctuary, and under his leadership, the Old Plaza Church — known affectionately as La Placita — had offered thousands of refugees food, shelter, and legal aid. Olivares himself had testified before the City Council in favor of Woo’s resolution.

**Initially, La Placita Church had offered sanctuary behind a mask. But in the wake of the Council resolution, it joined the fight out in the open. “We’re not rich but we are offering to share what little we have,” said a woman from Mexico, who had offered to shelter a refugee family.**

But initially, La Placita had offered sanctuary behind a mask. The Catholic hierarchy allowed churches to provide relief to refugees, but was leery of the legal and political ramifications of openly declaring its intent to protect and transport undocumented immigrants. By 1985, Olivares was preparing to declare the church a public sanctuary, hoping for support from the Archdiocese but not waiting for it. To Olivares’s delight, the City Council’s passage of the first resolution had given the archbishop the political cover he needed to convey his backing (although, in a last-minute switch, he did not attend the ceremonies himself).

On the Virgin's Day, La Placita joined the fight out in the open. A Salvadoran couple and a Guatemalan mother and her three children stood before a full sanctuary (a literal one), dressed in black, their faces covered by scarves. The Salvadoran woman, her voice quivering, spoke of murdered family, and the pain of having to leave her children with friends and escape the country. "Imagine how I feel away from them," she said. "Yet, the president of this country continues sending arms and bombs to destroy our homes and our country."

Some parishioners expressed mixed feelings about the church's decision, but most supported it. A woman from Mexico, who had offered to shelter a refugee family, reflected on her own trials. "When we first arrived in this country, we suffered a lot and there was no one to give us a hand," she said. "We're not rich but we are offering to share what little we have."



Father Luis A. Olivares speaks at a Sunday mass on Dec. 12, 1985, feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, at La Placita Church in Los Angeles, alongside masked refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala carrying signs with the numbers of the slain. Prior to this, La Placita had offered sanctuary to refugees discretely. But in the wake of the passage of the City Council resolution, it unmasked itself as a sanctuary.

In the years that followed, La Placita broadened its protections, defending immigrant day laborers who were illegal to hire, then street vendors barred from selling flowers and fruits by rigid city codes. Even with their sanctuary work

concealed, church members had shown courage, and now they were unmasked, no longer hiding.

Alicia Rivera is still raising sanctuaries at a moment of danger. She's become an organizer for Communities for a Better Environment in Wilmington, California, near the Port of Los Angeles. The area's massive oil drilling and refining operations lead to asthma, emphysema, and cancer in the community, which is 90 percent Latinx. It's hard enough combating the oil industry, she says, but her neighbors are terrified to attend meetings; their relatives have vanished, been detained, or been deported. "I think it's more extreme now than it was then," she tells me. ICE agents don't remind her of the INS she knew back in the 1980s. They remind her of the Salvadoran state she fled. She knows there's a big difference, but she says ICE reminds her of the death squads, "just taking everyone they can, and targeting them, and instilling fear."

She's proud of California's new sanctuary laws, and says they flow from earlier struggles. A generation of Anglo politicians and voters grew up in schoolrooms with refugee and immigrant children that Harold Ezell could not keep away.

**I ask Alicia Rivera if the word "sanctuary" — the name Los Angeles once, fleetingly, called itself, and does again today — makes a difference. She insists it does.**

I ask her if the word "sanctuary" — the name Los Angeles once, fleetingly, called itself, and does again today — makes a difference. She insists it does. Anti-immigrant politicians are out in public, in force. Communities need to fight back without fear, shame, or apology. They need to be willing to tell the federal government "you are wrong, and we are going to take a stand," she says.

She thinks about what she would tell the United States' leaders, past and present. "You have made it difficult for me to live in my country. I have left because of your intervention," she says. "I am here, now, in your face."

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