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The Sanctuary Movement: Civil Disobedience as Protection Rather Than Protest

The Sanctuary Movement represents a distinct branch of civil disobedience, one that is often misunderstood because it does not fit neatly into narratives of protest, persuasion, or reform. Sanctuary is not primarily about changing the law. It is about intervening when the law is actively harming people. Its central question is not "How do we expose injustice?" but "How do we stop it right now?"

The modern Sanctuary Movement in the United States began in the early 1980s, when faith communities, particularly churches and synagogues, began sheltering refugees fleeing violence in Central America. Many of these refugees were escaping civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, conflicts in which the U.S. government was deeply implicated. Although international law recognized their right to seek asylum, U.S. immigration policy routinely denied protection and returned people to situations where they faced torture or death.

Faced with this contradiction, sanctuary participants concluded that legal compliance would result in direct harm. Courts moved slowly. Appeals failed. Enforcement continued. In response, churches began openly violating federal law by housing, transporting, and concealing undocumented refugees. This was civil disobedience without spectacle. There were no marches, no demands, and often no public statements at all. The act itself was the intervention.

This marks an important departure from other civil disobedience traditions. Thoreau emphasized withdrawal of cooperation. King emphasized public confrontation designed to force institutional response. Malcolm X questioned whether the system could be trusted at all. Sanctuary incorporates elements of all three, but reframes the purpose. Lawbreaking is not symbolic. It is instrumental. The goal is not moral clarity, negotiation, or even long-term change. The goal is safety.

Sanctuary assumes that legal systems can fail so completely that waiting for reform is indistinguishable from compliance with harm. In those moments, legality loses relevance as a guide for action. What matters instead is responsibility: who will act, who will shelter, and who will absorb risk to protect someone else. This is why sanctuary is often practiced quietly. Publicity can endanger the very people it is meant to protect.

At the same time, sanctuary is not apolitical. It challenges the legitimacy of enforcement by refusing cooperation and forcing authorities to choose between escalation and restraint. When churches openly declared themselves sanctuaries in the 1980s, federal prosecutors responded with

surveillance, infiltration, and criminal trials. Several sanctuary workers were convicted of federal crimes. Yet even these prosecutions revealed a dilemma for the state.

Sanctuary's power lies in this tension. It does not rely on persuasion in advance. It relies on facts on the ground. A person is sheltered. Removal is delayed or prevented. The state must decide whether to escalate force or tolerate defiance.

Unlike mass protest movements, sanctuary is often decentralized and relational. Decisions are made locally, based on trust networks rather than formal leadership. Participants must decide what risks they are willing to take: housing someone, transporting them, providing resources, or simply refusing to cooperate with enforcement.

This feature makes sanctuary especially relevant to contemporary struggles around immigration enforcement. Efforts to block removals, delay deportations, or interfere with enforcement operations often resemble sanctuary in practice, even when they do not use the term.

Sanctuary also exposes the limits of nonviolence as a moral framework. While sanctuary actions are often nonviolent, they are not neutral. They directly interfere with state power. They prioritize outcomes over optics.

Historically, sanctuary is not new. It echoes earlier traditions of refuge and protection, including medieval church sanctuaries and the Underground Railroad. What unites these practices is not ideology, but urgency.

Sanctuary does not offer easy answers. It offers a framework for action when delay is itself a form of violence. It reminds us that civil disobedience is not always about changing the future. Sometimes it is about preventing the present from becoming worse.

Selected Sources

Sources listed reflect the scholarly and historical traditions informing this essay rather than direct quotation.

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