News



Rebecca Kitana, a parishioner at St. Matthew Church in Northwood, Maryland, talks during an Oct. 10 announcement at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Baltimore about an identification card program to be coordinated through Catholic parishes and other congregations in the city of Baltimore. Seated, from left, are Fr. Bruce Lewandowski, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus; Mayor Catherine Pugh; and interim Police Commissioner Gary Tuggle. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

Paul McMullen

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Baltimore — November 8, 2018
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This generation of immigrants to Baltimore will continue to find a haven in the Catholic Church.

That was the message Oct. 10 from the steps of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, where Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, Archbishop William Lori and Catholic pastors who minister to those from foreign countries attended the announcement of the establishment of a Parish ID program.

The program's priority is "focused on helping residents to feel comfortable interacting with the Baltimore City Police Department," according to BUILD, or Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, which helped organize the initiative.

Even though the enforcement of immigration laws falls primarily under federal jurisdiction rather than municipal jurisdiction, many of the city's immigrants who are living in the U.S. without legal documents remain hesitant to report crimes committed against them, for fear of their own arrest, and possible deportation and separation from their families.

"No one should be a victim because they're afraid of calling police," said Pugh, who backed the initiative at a town hall in June.

With the backing of the Baltimore Archdiocese and logistical support from Catholic Charities of Baltimore, which will print the cards, residents will be able to obtain a non-government-issued ID that shows their photo and home address.

"The full weight of the Archdiocese of Baltimore is behind this effort," said Archbishop Lori, head of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

The program will be launched at Sacred Heart of Jesús-Sagrado Corazón de Jesus, followed by St. Matthew in Northwood and then other parishes that serve immigrant communities.

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According to BUILD, city residents who have been members of its affiliate churches for three months are eligible for a Parish ID. It requires an existing identification, such as a passport; proof of address, such as a utility bill; a notarized statement from another person who can verify one's identity; and attendance at a half-day orientation.

Interim Police Commissioner Gary Tuggle said that the card was being introduced to command staff Oct. 11, and department-wide in the next two weeks. BUILD said the IDs will only be recognized in the city.

While some logistics remain to be worked out, priests such as Redemptorist Fr. Bruce Lewandowski and Fr. Joseph Muth, who are the respective pastors of those faith communities, will play a substantial role in the roll-out.

"The best example I can think of, I call 911 to report a break in, my house has been robbed," Lewandowski said. "I call the police, how do they know I live there? How do I identify myself? If I'm an immigrant, I can show them my passport, but that just says I come from another country.

"I show them my Parish ID, [it shows] there are people there who know me and can verify my identity. If someone is stopped by the police, it says people know me."

Several speakers alluded to the hope that the program could help drive down crime in a city coming off the deadliest year in its history.

"We are sending a clear message, that people have a right to be safe," the archbishop said. "People have a right to live in a city where they see each other as neighbors and friends, rather than strangers and enemies."

"With the security offered by this ID, people will stop looking over their shoulders and stop hiding in their homes and parishes," he added. "This ID provides one avenue to freedom from fear. The ID card is a way of developing trust … and creating safer streets and homes."



Baltimore Archbishop William Lori speaks to the media regarding the new parishioner identification card pilot program Oct. 10 at Sacred Heart of Jesús-Sagrado Corazón de Jesus Church. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

Asked what qualifies him to vouch for his people, Lewandowski said, "I know probably 1,500 people in this parish alone, probably 800 at St. Patrick and probably 400 more at Our Lady of Fatima."

Muth can speak for Rebecca Kitana, a native of Kenya and member of the Immigration Outreach Service Center, based at St. Matthew Church. The parish is both her spiritual home and her literal one, as she resides in its convent through the auspices of Asylee Women's Enterprise.

"Anyone who comes to our door is given a safe place," Kitana said of the outreach center, which has assisted immigrants from more than 140 countries. "At the IOSC, we know that many immigrants will benefit from the Parish ID. There are people who are living in fear.

"I personally know a woman who is scared to leave her house, because she is afraid that she will come into contact with police, be detained and force to leave behind

her child. An ID like this will make people less afraid, and more fully engaged."

Muth noted the history of Baltimore, and the church.

"We're an immigrant church, in an immigrant city," Muth said. "The city was built, and the church was built, by and for immigrants of many generations. Now we're taking this step for the next generation, to keep them protected with ID cards that acknowledge their place in the community."

[Paul McMullen is managing editor of the Catholic Review, the news website and magazine of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.]

This story appears in the **The Field Hospital** feature series. View the full series.