News



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Nearly five dozen priests attending the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests annual assembly spent 90 minutes with a Honduran who sought protection from deportation in a St. Louis-area church.

The priests heard from Rene "Alex" Garcia Maldonado and his wife, Carleen, in a 90-minute meeting June 25 at Christ Church United Church of Christ in Maplewood, one of a loose network of faith communities nationwide that offers protection under the biblical concept of sanctuary.

Carleen Garcia and the couple's five children, ranging in age from 5 to 14, are U.S. citizens while Alex Garcia is not.

The priests were among 260 Association members who attended the association's eighth annual assembly June 24-27, focusing on the theme "God's Priestly People: The Baptized and the Ordained."

Sara John, executive director of the St. Louis Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America, told Catholic News Service June 27 the event was arranged at the couple's request so they could explain their situation and encourage clergy and others to seek changes in the country's immigration laws.

Garcia, 38, originally from Honduras, sought sanctuary Sept. 21, 2017, after federal immigration officials denied an extension of a stay of a removal order and ordered him to report for deportation, John said. Alex Garcia has been in the U.S. for 13 years and has received earlier extensions of the stay.

Alex Garcia left his family in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, 155 miles south of St. Louis, soon after receiving the deportation notice. Carleen Garcia and the couple's five children at first made weekly visits. She moved to the St. Louis area in March with three of the children, allowing them to visit daily with Garcia, John said.

John described a scene of high emotion for the Garcias during the discussion with the priests. The couple declined to participate in a question-and-answer session after their presentation. "They were in tears," she said.

Before the visit, John explained to the priests that meeting the Garcias was not meant as a "voyeuristic" opportunity to showcase people who are caught in the web of changing rules under the U.S. immigration policy.

"This is something that Carly and Alex wanted to do because they invited you to talk with them," John said she told the priests. "The fact is they are living in trauma every day and it is always their choice to speak or not speak or to show or not show that trauma."

John added that she hoped the event would motivate priests to act on behalf of people in sanctuary and others facing deportation to difficult circumstances in their homeland.

The assembly also heard from Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago. Details of his presentation were not available.

Sr. Norma Pimentel, a member of the Missionaries of Jesus, who is executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, also addressed the assembly.

Pimentel in her June 25 presentation described the agency's work with recent arrivals from Central America, providing food and clothes and helping guide migrants toward family and friends in the U.S.

People are fleeing violence and poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, she said, so they can protect their children.

She also accompanied the priests to Christ Church to meet with the Garcias.

As is its custom, the association presented its St. John XIII Award to Pimentel for her work and Fr. Richard Creason, a retired priest of the St. Louis Archdiocese, who is well-known for his social justice ministry.

Creason, a priest for 49 years, worked to improve the north St. Louis neighborhood around the parish of his last assignment before his 2016 retirement, Most Holy Trinity Church. He also introduced the community to "Mass mobs," which encouraged Catholics to attended Mass at older urban churches.

In preparation for the association's 2020 assembly in Baltimore, members identified six issues to work on: climate change, immigration, women in the church, clericalism, issues within the priesthood and the church's role in the political world in advance of the 2020 elections.

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