News



Sisters Ana Saucedo, left, and Rosario Saucedo, were among the hundreds rallying for Lights for Liberty July 12 outside the federal detention center where migrant children are being held in Homestead, Florida. (Mike Clary)

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From New York City to the southern border, thousands of pro-immigrant demonstrators in hundreds of cities gathered July 12 to protest Trump Administration immigration policies.

The coordinated protests were dubbed "Lights for Liberty," featuring a logo of the Statue of Liberty, an icon of welcoming immigrants to the U.S.

New York

Just miles from the statue, across from immigration courts in lower Manhattan, thousands filled Foley Square with a protest that took a decidedly religious turn.

The Rev. Kaji Douša, senior pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church, quoted Matthew 25, with a message "for anyone who claims to be a Christian and ignores that Jesus was a refugee and an immigrant who said, 'Whatsoever you do to the least of these you do unto me.' You need to know that there are eternal consequences to consider." She added, "And I don't mean that as a threat, it's actually a friendly warning to get your life right."

Douša made headlines last week when she filed a federal lawsuit alleging that her religious freedom was violated when U.S. officials placed her on a watchlist in response to her longtime ministry to migrants at the border. In January, after participating in a Sanctuary Caravan of faith leaders to Tijuana, Mexico, Dousa was detained for several hours by federal immigration officers and interrogated about her work both on the border and in New York City.



Protestors raise their hands in prayer over the immigration court building in Federal Plaza, during the Lights for Liberty vigil July 12 in New York. (NCR/Jamie Manson)

Rabbi Joshua Stanton of Manhattan's East End Temple brought his congregation to observe Shabbas at the protest. Inviting members to light and lift their Shabbas candles, Stanton recited the traditional Hebrew prayer that opens Friday services. But for Stanton, peace did not prevail this Sabbath evening. "I cannot bless my son with a full heart while there are other children kept in cages. … I cannot be a rabbi at peace and there cannot be a Shabbat of peace while there is a reign of terror against children in our country," the rabbi told the crowd.

Fr. Fabián Arias, a pastor at the Church of Sión, part of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan, asked protestors to turn around to face the immigration court building in Federal Plaza, which he called a representation of the "wall of injustice."

Arias, speaking in Spanish, asked everyone in the crowd to raise their hands in prayer and "take a profound silence."

Arias then said a prayer, which was simultaneously translated into English.

> God, Father of us all, in this moment there are leaders that were chosen to protect and care for our people. But hate, anger, racism, violence and discrimination have separated them from their hearts. Bless them, transform their hearts, so that they understand that we are all brothers and sisters and that we have to care for each other and protect each other. Bless this beautiful earth. Bless this beautiful country of the United States of America, that has always received all immigrants and will continue to receive them with the same love and the same blessed protection.

Missing from the lineup of faith-based speakers were members of the Catholic clergy or religious communities, though a number of women religious and lay Catholics from local parishes could be found in the crowd.



Bernice McCann, a Catholic laywoman, Sr. Joseph Sr. Susan Wilcox, and Brooklyn Vetter, associate director of the St. Joseph Worker program, were among

the demonstrators for Lights for Liberty July 12 in New York. (NCR/Jamie Manson)

Among them was St. Joseph Sr. Susan Wilcox, justice, peace, and integrity of creation coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood. Wilcox said that members of her community were at similar rallies held on Long Island. Their presence was a way to honor her congregation's charism.

"In the spirituality of the Sisters of St. Joseph, we say that all is one, and we take that very seriously that we are the body of Christ. So you cannot be an illegal person in the eyes of God. You still hold human dignity, and that dignity is being so demoralized at the point. And it is heartbreaking and outrageous," she said.

"The charism also says loving God without distinction," added Brooklyn Vetter, associate director of the St. Joseph Worker program. "That really is what brings me to do most things. And in the case of these detention centers, I see God in those cages."

El Paso, Texas

In El Paso, Texas, a vigil began in front of the US-Mexico Port of Entry, with protestors carrying posters proclaiming that "Jesus was a refugee"; "What you do to the least of my brethren …"; "Immigrants are children of God too!"; "Where are the Pro-lifers?"; and "No human being is illegal."

Speakers described the conditions in detention centers for migrants as dehumanizing. Others said that the Trump Administration was guilty of fear mongering and anti-immigrant policies that perpetuate the trauma that children experience at being separated from their parents. They described the southern border as this age’s new Ellis Island.

McAllen, Texas

La Unión del Pueblo Entero, or LUPE, along with Angry Tías and Abuelas of the Rio Grande Valley, the Texas Civil Rights Project, the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network, ARISE, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health held the Lights for Liberty vigil in front of the Ursula Detention Center in protest of the Trump administration’s "zero tolerance" policy that separates families at the border, caging men, women, and children in detention camps.

They gathered hours before Vice President Mike Pence and Sen. Lindsey Graham witnessed the conditions of immigrants being held at the Ursula Center, the largest detention center for undocumented immigrants in the United States. Elias, 13, spoke of his experience seeking asylum:

> I came with my uncle and they separated me from him. I did not want to leave him and my little brother. They allowed my brother to stay with my uncle. I felt very alone because I did not have anyone to talk to. It was freezing. If I wanted to lay down, there were no blankets, and I had to sleep on the floor with the paper they give us for the cold, but I didn't use them because it felt even colder. The meals were uncooked and I didn't eat them because they seemed to be expired or rotten. I felt very bad because I wasn't with my brother, my uncle, or my parents. I thought I was not going to be able to stay here.

Martha Sanchez, community organizing coordinator for LUPE, said the Rio Grande Valley welcomes immigrant families with love, compassion and dignity. "We wanted to bring light to the injustices that are happening with the families who are seeking asylum, especially because they are right here in our backyard. And we really wanted to stand up to the vice president, the administration, and let them know that we are against the mistreatment of families and children specifically. This is not the way our faith calls us to treat children," she said.

News of immigrant deaths brought protesters from out of state. Amy Brown from Kansas City, Kansas, watched media coverage of the mistreatment of immigrants for the last two years under Trump. "I am mortified to call him my president and as soon as we saw the conditions, I said I want to be there as a witness so no one can say this didn't happen. I saw it and so we came."

Homestead, Florida

In Homestead, Florida, several hundred people gathered on a patch of grass across the street from the nation's largest federal detention center for unaccompanied minors, to show their support for the immigrants locked inside the compound and to castigate Trump administration policies.

They spent more than two hours in sweltering South Florida heat to bear witness to an immigration crisis.

"My faith has put me here," said Melinda McCown, 53, a Catholic from Naples, Florida. "In some way, those children know we are here, know that we support them."

It was unclear if the children locked inside a two-story building dormitory and held in large tents — all fronted by a beige wall and a line of uniformed federal agents and Miami-Dade County police — could hear the shouts of their supporters.

But that did not dampen the enthusiasm of the crowd, pressed tightly together to hear from religious leaders and civil rights activists who spoke through a battery-powered megaphone while standing in the bed of a pickup truck.



Claudia Casillas and son Antonio, 3, were among hundreds who rallied July 12 outside the federal detention center in Homestead, Florida, where migrant children are being held. (Mike Clary)

Fr. Frank O'Loughlin, executive director of the Guatemalan-Maya Center in Lake Worth, spoke in Spanish to the children, as if they could hear him. "God is just, and nothing can separate [you] from our care," he told them.

The demonstrators also heard from the Rev. Willie Allen-Faiella, rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Miami's Coconut Grove section, who said, "Today we stand outside the very antithesis of Ellis Island. This place is a mockery of the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. … This place [is] where children are locked up and crony capitalists are making blood money off them."

Al Griffiths, 70, and his wife Nancy, organized a three-hour bus trip from their home in Sebastian, Florida, 190 miles to the north, and brought 34 others with them. "The atrocities that are coming out of the Washington — it was never like this," said Griffiths, a Vietnam War veteran who wore on his back a placard depicting Lady Liberty covering her face in shame. "They are stoking fear. And the worst part is, they are proud of it."

Remarks from speakers were punctuated by chants, including: "No hate. No fear. Immigrants are welcome here," and "Shut it down!"

In the crowd were people in costume — some dressed as Lady Liberty — and many homemade signs: "Free These Kids," "No Human is Illegal," "Reunir a las Familias Ahora."

The Homestead facility, adjacent to the Reserve Air Force Base and 30 miles south of Miami, last week housed more than 2,000 migrants, according to published reports. It is run by a for-profit contractor, Caliburn International, and was visited last month by several Democratic candidates who were in Miami for the first presidential debate. They were not allowed inside.

Washington

In Washington, D.C., protestors heard refugee Krishanti Vignarajah say, "The diversity of this crowd is the beauty of this nation. It is not our weakness but it is our strength. And it gives me so much hope to see so many standing for the most vulnerable, for those people who have been left without a voice — vulnerable immigrants like my own family."

Vignarajah, a former policy adviser to Michelle Obama and Maryland gubernatorial candidate, went on to tell her own story of arriving in the United States as a refugee at 9 months old because her parents decided to flee a civil war in Sri Lanka.

"Thank God we were able to be welcomed into a country that allowed us to seek refuge here, to welcome us just as it welcomed the tired, the poor, the huddled masses," she said. "And for my parents who were both teachers, it was this country that allowed them to become educators and to send their daughter to Yale and Oxford and, eventually, the White House."



American Federation of Teachers march to Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., for the beginning of the Lights of Liberty vigil, chanting, "This is what democracy looks like!" (NCR/Jesse Remedios)

Vignarajah's was one of many diverse immigrant stories shared with the crowd gathered in Lafayette Square, the public park directly in front of the White House. The crowd of activists packed much of Lafayette Park, with many audience members holding handmade signs expressing support for immigrants.

"We must come together at every intersection," said Ruby Corado, a transgender Latina immigrant and founder of Casa Ruby, a support organization for the LGBTQ community in D.C.

Gustavo Torres, the master of ceremony and executive director of the immigrant advocacy organization CASA, told the crowd he was honored to join them to "take a stand against American tyranny."

Hope Frye, an immigration attorney who discovered a prematurely born 1-month-old baby and her 17-year-old mother in an overcrowded border patrol center in McAllen, Texas, exclaimed that "this is the beginning of a revolution, don't let it die."



Activists hold up signs next to the stage July 12 at the Lights of Liberty vigil in Washington, D.C. (NCR/Jesse Remedios)

One speaker, Ingrid Castillo, arrived in the United States a few months ago from Honduras with her two young children, ages 4 and 6. She recalled how, after a long journey walking from Honduras to flee domestic violence, she was forced to sleep on

a cold floor with her children while being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"I just want to tell you, Mr. President, that you have kids and a wife. Put your hand in your heart to understand why we came here," Castillo pleaded with the president, who was not in the White House but flying back to D.C. from Cleveland at the time of the vigil.

Gerson Quinteros, an organizer with the immigrant youth-led network United We Dream and recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, shared his memories of being detained by ICE as a 9-year-old boy after crossing the border. Quinteros said he remembers being put in a "cold cell" with a cement bench that was only a few feet from the bathroom.

Imam Talib Shareef of the nation’s mosque, Masjid Muhammad — a mosque in Washington, D.C., founded by the descendants of enslaved Africans 83 years ago — connected the detainment of undocumented immigrants to the freedom movement of slaves who were also "separated, segregated, degraded, concentrated in camps."

Shareef concluded by saying "all of our significant figures" from the three Abrahamic religions – Moses, Jesus, Mohammad — were immigrants and refugees at different points in their own lives.

"That is to tell us, as faith leaders, that we should be the first to speak out," he said.

Kansas City, Missouri

A mix of candles, tea lights and votives illuminated Washington Square Park on a cool summer evening in Kansas City, Missouri.

Several hundred people stood in silence near the end of the local Lights for Liberty vigil, as two teens from Lincoln College Preparatory Academy read testimonials written by youth detained at the border.



Teens hold signs protesting the treatment of immigrants at the U.S-Mexico border while testimonials of people held in detention centers are read as part of the Lights for Liberty vigil July 12 in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR/Brian Roewe)

"We have one mat we need to share. It's very cold. We are given Mylar blankets but it is not enough to warm up," said a 16-year-old girl. “They allow a few of us to sleep outside the fenced area. The lights are on constantly."

A 12-year-old described how officers separated her from her grandmother.

"My grandmother tried to show the officers a paper signed by my parents saying that my grandmother had been entrusted to take care of us," she wrote. "The officers rejected the paperwork, saying it had to be signed by a judge. Then the officers took my dear grandmother away. We have not seen her since that moment."

Chants in English and Spanish rung out throughout the rally, with "Shut the camps down!" a common refrain. Signs displayed messages like "Families belong together," "Jesus was a child refugee" and "They shouldn't have to be yours for you to care."



Local artist Jessica Ayala leads the crowd in chants during the Lights for Liberty vigil July 12 in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR/Brian Roewe)

Organizers led the crowd in calling for closure of detention camps at the border and other holding facilities across the country, ending family separation and abolishing ICE. They also advocated respect for the rights of asylum-seekers and recognition of the role of U.S. foreign policy in creating conditions that have led people to leave their homes.

Karen Spring, a coordinator for the Honduras Solidarity Network, criticized the U.S. government's support of a "corrupt" regime in conflict-stricken Honduras. Following disputed elections in 2017, her husband was among hundreds arrested during protests that saw security forces shoot bullets and tear gas into the crowds.

Two tables invited those in attendance to send postcards to the congressional representatives from Missouri and Kansas. Working the Kansas table was Jeannie Chavez, who drove three hours to attend the KC vigil, bringing along her son and grandchildren. She watched as the stack of 600 postcards quickly dwindled.

"It's been nonstop since I got here at 6," she told NCR.



People fill out postcards addressed to the Missouri congressional delegation during the Lights for Liberty rally and vigil at Washington Square Park July 12 in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

A first-generation American, Chavez said her parents came to this country from Ireland and Mexico. That familial connection to immigration has made the current situation so troubling, she said, noting her father, who was 4 when he came to the U.S., would likely be separated from his family if he had arrived at the border today.

"But whether you're related to it directly, or just from the point of being a human being, what's going on is totally, totally deplorable and totally inhumane," said Chavez, a former immigration attorney.

Within the crowd were Mercy Sisters Claudette Schiratti and Jeanne Christensen. They said many Mercy sisters were heading to the southern border to be present with immigrates there.

"Separating children from their parents is immoral," said Schiratti, adding "This is not who our country is."

The sisters urged Catholics to "be here, stand up, speak out" on immigration issues, particularly by voting in the 2020 elections.

Compiled by reports from Jamie Manson in New York, Arturo Bañuelas in El Paso, Ruby Fuentes in McAllen, Mike Clary in Homestead, Jesse Remedios in Washington and Brian Roewe in Kansas City.

This story was updated July 17 to include reporting from McAllen, Texas.

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