News



Jesuit Marcos Gonzales opens the July 23-26 Ignatian Justice Summit on Immigration, held at John Carroll University in Cleveland, with a talk titled "Seeking Justice Through an Ignatian Lens." (Courtesy of Ignatian Solidarity Network)



by John Gehring

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The young Jesuit is preaching. On this late July day, church is a room at John Carroll University in Cleveland, where more than two dozen college students from 14 Jesuit campuses are settling in for an intensive training that is part Ignatian spiritual retreat, part boot camp for young activists.

"What are the structures of injustice that I benefit from and that my schools benefit from?" Marcos Gonzales, a Jesuit in formation who teaches at Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix, asks the group. Students sit in a circle taking notes. A banner with a famous exhortation from St. Ignatius — "Go forth and set the world on fire!" — stands at the front of the room. A table arrayed with salty reinforcements to sustain the students through long days that last until after 9 p.m. is in the back.

Gonzales, 35, who previously worked with ex-gang members at Homeboy Ministries in Los Angeles and has spent years ministering to migrants, gives an overview of the Ignatian "Spiritual Exercises" as a way of connecting immigration advocacy to deeper values. "A lot of people are social justice activists," he says, "but for us, faith and justice are never separated. We pass a law, and that changes how we're supposed to act. But the work of transforming the heart is what we do in activism. That is harder."

The priest then offers a cheeky practical tip for the burgeoning student activists. "If you want to get something done on your campus, and an administrator asks why, tell them the 'Universal Apostolic Preferences'," he notes with a wry smile, referring to the thematic priorities set by Jesuits from around the world: spiritual discernment, caring for our common home, walking with the excluded and journeying with youth. "Your university has a responsibility to carry these out," Gonzales says.

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This three-day training, an Ignatian Justice Summit focused on helping students become more effective advocates for immigrants on their campuses and in local and national policies, is coordinated by Ignatian Solidarity Network (ISN), a national organization based in Cleveland.

Ignatian Solidarity Network is most widely known in Catholic circles for hosting the annual Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice, which draws more than 1,500 high school and college students from Jesuit institutions to Washington, D.C., every fall for workshops, trainings and a lobby day on Capitol Hill. The network has its roots in decades of organizing and protest in response to the 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter by the Salvadoran military at the University of Central America in El Salvador. Nineteen of the 26 soldiers were trained at what was then called the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. Beginning in the 1990s, Catholic and other faith-based activists started to gather for a vigil outside the gates of the school, drawing attention to the United States' role in training military personnel involved in the Jesuits' murders and other terror campaigns throughout Latin America. The teach-in emerged from those gatherings.

Ignatian Solidarity Network was founded in 2004. It recently hosted an immersion trip to El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez on the U.S.-Mexico border and coordinates an ongoing Campaign for Hospitality that includes Jesuit schools, parishes and individuals committed to taking action on migration.



Jessica Gonzalez and Sarah Tooley, students at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, share action plans for their immigration work on their campus at the culmination of the Ignatian Justice Summit. (Courtesy of Ignatian Solidarity Network)

Inspired by Pope Francis' call to create a culture of encounter, as well as being a timely response to rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies from the White House

and state legislatures, the campaign is focused on education about and direct experience with migrants, along with providing advocacy tools for individuals and institutions. A similar Ignatian Carbon Challenge encourages Jesuit schools to raise awareness about the climate crisis through prayer, education and concrete changes to campus policies. Next month, ISN is coordinating a parish justice summit in New Jersey for staff and parishioners in more than two dozen Jesuit churches across the country.

As the network celebrates its 15th anniversary, there are signs that the organization is emerging as one of the most significant and innovative Catholic social justice organizations in the country. It's also creating that rare space where young Catholics — often disillusioned and disconnected from the church — still find fuel for their faith during a time when the clergy abuse crisis again has cast a pall over Catholic institutions.

Ignatian Solidarity Network received a $750,000 grant from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development in June. The three-year grant, a reflection of ISN's growing visibility as a leader in faith-based organizing, will enable the organization to expand its advocacy capacity and deepen its network.

"It's huge for us," says Chris Kerr, 41, the network's executive director since 2011. "This really helps us ensure that those who are most vulnerable when it comes to immigration policies and most marginalized by those policies are not only at the table but have a significant voice and leadership role in our work."



Symbols of solidarity with migrants utilized throughout the justice summit were present at the final commissioning prayer service. (Courtesy of Ignatian Solidarity Network)

José Cabrera, who graduated from Xavier University in Cincinnati last year, is ISN's new director of education and advocacy on migration, a position made possible by the new grant funding. Along with approximately 700,000 other young immigrants across the country, Cabrera has Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, an Obama-era program that provided temporary protection from deportation for children of undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as minors. In the fall of 2017, the Trump administration announced it was terminating DACA. The future of the program remains uncertain.

At 24, Cabrera is already a seasoned immigration activist with a personal story at once heartbreaking and inspiring. It's a story he's told frequently — at packed immigration rallies, to professors, before members of Congress — and today he's telling it again to the student activists.

At four, Cabrera crossed the U.S.-Mexico border with his mother. A "*coyote*," the slang term for a person paid to assist undocumented immigrants over the border, convinced his mother that if she gave him more money José could use his son's U.S. citizen's papers. She agreed. Cabrera and his mom were separated for four days before being reunited. "We were homeless for a year," he tells students as he paces around the room, punctuating his words with animated gestures. "My mom sold tamales, chiles rellenos, whatever she could, saving money until we could get a one-bedroom apartment in the toughest hood in Cincinnati. She would work all day. She quit her second job and became an activist and started a non-profit that helped undocumented workers." He pauses. "See, your body movement is key. You have to put your whole body into it! That draws people in."

Thairy Garcia, a student at St. Peter's University in Jersey City, New Jerse,, relates to Cabrera's story of wanting to turn pain and trauma into something positive. When she was 11, Garcia's undocumented father was put in immigrant detention. He was later released but then was deported back to Guatemala two months ago.



Ignatian Solidarity Network Executive Director Christopher Kerr leads an evening vigil prayer for immigrant children, particularly those who have died at the U.S.-

Mexico border. (Courtesy of Ignatian Solidarity Network)

"I had to learn at a very young age what most kids don't have to know," Garcia says, tearing up. "I'm angry. For me, I couldn't do anything for my dad, and I felt hopeless, but I want to learn how to use my experience to connect with and help others in the same situation."

Other students here, all nominated for the ISN training by campus ministers or directors of service and justice centers at their universities, don't have an immediate connection to immigration issues but are eager to immerse themselves in policy.

Sarah Tooley, 19, a Creighton University political science and communications major, is active at the Schlegel Center for Service and Justice on her campus in Omaha, Nebraska. "As a white person, I know I have privilege and I want to use that as a platform to be in solidarity with people," Tooley said. Tooley brings up Blessed Fr. Stanley Rother, like her, a native of Oklahoma. She attended his beatification Mass. "I mean, he was just this German farm boy who went to Guatemala and worked for justice. He was on a hit list. How fearless is that? I want to be an example like that in a small way."

For Joanna Williams, immigration isn't an abstract, intellectual exercise. The director of education and advocacy at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, Williams sees the suffering and hopes of migrants every day. During a policy briefing session for the students, she starts with a disclaimer.

"Policy is an empty shell unless it's connected to individual stories and people's experiences," she tells the group. "That's the core of why we do this." The flood of anti-immigration policies now coming from the Trump administration, Williams says, creates a daily crisis for immigrant families. She notes that only a few days prior the Trump administration officially started rolling out an "expedited removal" policy that allows federal immigration agents to immediately deport an immigrant without any hearing from an immigration judge.

Williams breaks the students up into small groups to think about barriers immigrants face in their own communities. Not enough tuition support for undocumented students and a lack of translation services for immigrants are raised. One student laments that Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) agents are allowed on her campus to advertise and recruit as part of job fairs. Williams weaves around the

room, listens in on the conversations and offers guidance.

Learning where to most strategically apply advocacy pressure, Williams tells them, is critical. Those "influencers" might be a university president, a state lawmaker or a county commissioner. A few students are stuck for ideas. "Some municipalities and cities have funded their own legal aid programs for immigrants," she tells them, "but most cities don't. You can work to have your city create a legal defense fund for immigrants or if there is one already, expand it." Other students float incremental steps. "Think more radically!" Williams encourages them. "When we talk advocacy and policy, we have to think about the pragmatic next step. But it's really important to have that big picture and reimagine the whole system."

The students head outside to some grassy space on campus, largely empty given the summer season, and sit around tables set up under a row of tress. Kent Adams, a Georgetown University junior active in the university's Center for Social Justice, is a coordinator for the DC Schools Project, a mentoring and advocacy program that provides English language skills and support for immigrant youth and adults in Washington. "With all of the immigration raids, we've been trying to prep families with know-your-rights training," Adams says.



Ignatian Justice Summit participants pose at John Carroll University in Cleveland (Courtesy of Ignatian Solidarity Network)

At another table, Marissa Ocampo of Santa Clara University in California is brainstorming with her classmate, Yesenia Magdaleno-Solis. They both like the idea of using art and multimedia presentations to help educate students about immigration. Even on a largely progressive campus like Santa Clara, tensions are rising. "There was a pro-Trump party in my dorm after the election," Ocampo says**.** "I felt more fear after the election."

Miles Tiemeyer, vice president of the College Democrats at Xavier University in Cincinnati, said students set up a mock border checkpoint on campus a few years ago. Moving from awareness building to specific policies is a next step. "We're trying to work with the [school] administration on divestment from fossil fuels, but we may also want to look into whether the university divests from private prisons or detention centers."

After some down time and a barbeque cooked up by ISN staff at Edgewater Park on Lake Erie, the students are back to work. During a video panel featuring recent graduates of Jesuit universities, Li Adorno, a 2017 alumnus of St. Peter's University in New Jersey, spoke about how student activists were integral to pushing the administration to show greater awareness of undocumented students, who for many years felt largely felt invisible on campus. As a student leader, Adorno wrote an open letter to the president of his university that highlighted the challenges of being undocumented. When student protests began nationally to call attention to undocumented students, Adorno led a walk-out at St. Peter's. The activism made a difference. In 2014, St. Peter's opened The Center for Undocumented Students, a welcoming space on campus that provides a range of support, including legal consultation with immigration attorneys, mental health counseling, financial aid resources and opportunities for work-study employment. St. Peter's is the first Jesuit university to have a dedicated center specifically for undocumented students.

On the last day of the training, students are developing action plans. Ideas include hosting an "UndocuWeek," a series of activities on campus focused on awareness raising and advocacy; using Instagram and other social media platforms to help tell the stories of immigrants; refugee simulations; and using art to help shift the narrative about migrants.

Cabrera, the Xavier University graduate who spoke about the power of personal stories and is now charged with leading the network's immigration advocacy, sends the students back home with a message.

"Organize and challenge people," he says. "We have your back. You're not alone. Remember, this movement, while it can be hard, it's a beautiful movement and it's for everyone. Immigration is not only a Latino issue."

[John Gehring is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life and author of *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church*. Faith in Public Life was a sponsor of the July 2019 Ignatian Justice Summit.]

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