News



Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Neb., gives the homily at Mass July 13, 2022, in the Crypt Church at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. Conley expressed concern Aug. 22, 2025, about "safeguarding human dignity" of detainees after the state's governor announced plans for a migrant detention center dubbed "Cornhusker Clink." (OSV News/Tyler Orsburn)

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Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, expressed concern Aug. 22 about "safeguarding human dignity" of detainees after the state's governor announced plans for a migrant detention center dubbed "Cornhusker Clink."

Conley urged the facility only be used to detain those in the U.S. without documents who have committed crimes endangering "public safety," not those just seeking a better life. He also said any detainee must be allowed to "access regular and ongoing pastoral care."

The detention facility — the latest in a series of new U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers with alliterative names as the Trump administration seeks to increase deportations — was announced by ICE and Republican Gov. Jim Pillen on Aug. 19. ICE said beds for the detention center will be made available at the Work Ethic Camp in McCook, Nebraska.

Conley said in a statement that for decades, "the Catholic Diocese of Lincoln has experienced an excellent relationship with the Work Ethic Camp in McCook."

"In response to Jesus' call to visit the imprisoned, we have celebrated Mass and provided sacramental and pastoral care on a weekly basis for those imprisoned all those years," he said.

A judge recently issued an order effectively blocking the Trump administration from sending detainees to Alligator Alcatraz in Florida's Everglades, citing environmental concerns. Catholic leaders have expressed concern about reports of inhumane

conditions at the facility, and Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami had to press officials to provide Catholic ministry, including the sacraments, to detainees.

Conley stressed, "It will be of utmost importance that any person detained in the federal immigration detention center in McCook can also access regular and ongoing pastoral care."

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"This is fundamental to the dignity of every human person, as each of us is called to union with God," he said. "Further, the facility in McCook should not be used to detain migrants without documentation who are in the United States simply seeking a better life, but instead those who have committed crimes that endanger public safety. To do otherwise would undermine the facility's moral legitimacy and erode public trust."

In announcing the new facility Aug. 19, Pillen said Nebraska "is stepping up its support" of President Donald Trump's and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem's "immigration enforcement initiatives in several key ways."

"I am pleased that our facility and team in McCook can be tasked with helping our federal partners protect our homeland by housing criminal illegal aliens roaming our country's communities today," he said. "I am also proud that the Nebraska State Patrol and National Guard will be assisting ICE enforcement efforts, as well. Homeland security starts at home, and, just as when I twice deployed troops to secure our southern border during the failed Biden administration, Nebraska will continue to do its part."

But Conley said that the U.S. bishops "have called for public officials to engage in meaningful immigration reform."

"This reform cannot be delayed any longer. The president and Congress must work together to develop laws that both respect our borders and also respect the rights of each person to migrate," he said, adding, "We must never forget: every person — whether an immigrant or not, documented or not — is a human being made in the image and likeness of God. This human dignity must be recognized and respected. Let us constantly see each other with the eyes of Jesus Christ, who looks mercifully and lovingly upon each one of us."

"As the Bishop of Lincoln, I remain committed to safeguarding human dignity which maintains public safety and respects our migrant brothers and sisters, and I invite all Nebraskans to this shared vision of hope in the Good Life," he said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.