News



Fr. Dennis Berry drives a young Venezuelan couple and their 8-year-old son back home from the rectory at St. James Parish, where they spent the afternoon doing laundry for themselves and eight other Venezuelans living with them. Camillo Barone's story about Berry was part of a package that earned him third place for an RNA award. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Chicago — November 4, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

"We thank you, Lord, for granting us the grace to do laundry in peace again today without fear of being deported," said Fr. Dennis Berry with a soft chuckle, sitting behind the wheel of his aging car on a late Sunday night in Chicago's South Side.

In the back seat, a young Venezuelan family — a couple and their 8-year-old son — clasped their hands, and shut their eyes tightly as the priest led them in prayer. Their laundry, folded neatly in plastic bags, filled the priest's car's trunk. For most families, it would have been an ordinary chore. For them, it was an act of courage.

Earlier that day, they had risked leaving their apartment — and the possibility of encountering U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers on their block — to do laundry at the rectory of St. James, the small parish where Berry serves.

They spent the afternoon there washing clothes for not just themselves, but for eight other Venezuelans living with them: the dad's sister, her husband and their two small children, and a single mother and her three daughters.



Fr. Dennis Berry stands in front of the stove in the kitchen of St. James Parish’s rectory. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

None of them had stepped outside for over a week.

The family members asked to remain anonymous to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality.

Across Chicago's South Side, whispers of ICE patrols have reshaped daily life for many recently arrived Venezuelans. Neighbors now wear whistles around their necks, blowing them to warn others when agents are spotted near schools or stores. Parents keep children home. Doctor appointments are missed.

In the couple's two-bedroom apartment, the curtains stay drawn. Their landlord, a Mexican immigrant, warned them never to leave the door open.

"We are very afraid, but we cannot go back to Venezuela," the young mother told the National Catholic Reporter. "The experience we had during the journey to get here has made us braver. After what we saw in those two months, nothing can scare us more than that."

Her husband once worked as a barber in Valencia, Venezuela. There, he earned about $20 a month, barely enough to live, while paying "protection money" to a local gang. "Otherwise," he said, "they would destroy my shop."

The family crossed the border into Texas in November 2024 aboard one of the buses organized by Texas Governor Greg Abbott to transport asylum seekers north. They arrived in Chicago with one suitcase between them and a scrap of paper with the dad's sister's address.



Venezuelan migrants at the Centro de los Trabajadores Agricolas Fronterizos (Border Farmworkers Center) in El Paso, Texas, wait in line to board a bus for Chicago and New York Sept. 2, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Paul Ratje)

Now, he cobbles together work cutting hair and doing shifts in factories. Both he and his wife  have obtained work permits and Social Security numbers, paying taxes while they await asylum hearings. But uncertainty shadows every step of the way.

"My biggest fear," the young father said quietly, "is that they will take me and leave my wife and children here — or take us and leave them alone. I would never see my children again."

Inside their apartment, fear hangs in the air like humidity. The living room is crowded with folding chairs and children's toys. The young father's sister rocked her 8-month-old baby on her knee.

Last week, she said, she tried to take the infant to a medical check-up. "But when I saw ICE agents a few blocks away," she said, "I ran back home."

The single mother who lives with them nodded. "A dear friend of mine was taken by ICE," she said. "She had an 11-year-old son. Now he is alone, staying with another Venezuelan family."

The three mothers spoke of the journey north — the kidnappings, the robberies, the sexual assaults and the crossing of the jungle in the Darien Gap — as if recounting a fever dream. "We have so much pain inside us," the barber's sister said. "Nothing can scare us anymore."




A card written by a young Venezuelan couple's 8-year-old son for Fr. Dennis Berry on Oct. 26, 2025, the day took the family to do laundry at the rectory at St. James Parish. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

For now, they ration food to one meal a day and rely on Fr. Berry for supplies and encouragement.

"He is like family," said the mom who had done her laundry that day in the rectory.

## "A Very Different Situation"

In his 51 years as a priest and missionary at the congregation of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, Berry has served in parishes from rural Alabama to the outskirts of Los Angeles. When he arrived in Chicago four years ago, newly assigned to "senior ministry" at 74, he expected to spend his final active years guiding seminarians and offering retreats.

That changed in the summer of 2023.

"Suddenly, 50,000 Venezuelans started arriving in Chicago," he told NCR while driving his car on a late night across the South Side of Chicago.

"Nobody knew what to do. At first I thought they were like the undocumented people I had always worked with. But I realized very quickly this was a very different situation."

Unlike the undocumented migrants of decades past, the new arrivals came not through networks of family or sponsors, but directly from the border, bused north with little more than the clothes they were wearing, a boxed lunch and the immigration papers that admitted them legally into the U.S. as temporary refugees from Venezuela.



Fr. Dennis Berry prays with Venezuelan immigrants at their home in South Side Chicago, Oct. 26, 2025, after bringing them back home from his parish's rectory,

where they did their laundry safely. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"Many didn't even know where they were," Berry said. "They didn't know that Chicago was on Lake Michigan or that Canada was nearby. They had no family here, no support system. So we had to be like their family."

He and his parish community began gathering clothes, finding doctors and organizing meals. They worked with Catholic Charities to help families move out of shelters into bare apartments — "literally empty apartments," he recalled, "nothing to sleep on, nothing to cook with."

"We worked with Notre Dame University, trying to get employment programs started," he said. "We just tried to help any way we could."

When Lent started in 2024, Berry began a small Spanish-language Mass for the newcomers. "People come because it gives them some sense of home," he said.

Then, this year, the tone of the work changed. "What's happening now," Berry said, "I call it the 'enforcement phase.'"

Over the past three months, he said, ICE raids in immigrant neighborhoods have become routine. Families who had spent a year building lives under legal protection suddenly found themselves being hunted by federal law enforcement.

"It is by far the worst experience I've ever had of mistreatment of immigrants in the United States," he said. "And I've been in places that didn't have a great love for immigrants — parts of the South, for example. But they were never mistreated like this. Not by the city, not by the state, but by the federal government. This is bizarre. I just don't know how to even describe it."

Advertisement

He paused before saying: "It's out-and-out aggression for no reason except for some political purpose. This is not right. This is wrong." Even their immigration attorney, Berry added, described the situation as "terrifying."

Before, he said, priests and lawyers could at least rely on the legal process. "You might lose a case, yes, but there was a reason. Now, there is a failure to follow the

law itself."

In what Politico described as "one of the most thorough legal rebukes in recent memory," more than 100 federal judges have issued at least 200 rulings finding that the federal administration's systematic detention of immigrants facing deportation violated their rights or was outright illegal.

The decisions span the ideological spectrum, coming from judges appointed by every president since Ronald Reagan — including a dozen appointed by President Donald Trump himself.

Sitting on a chair in the small living room after listening to the stories of his Venezuelan parishioners, Berry looked at his watch and played with one of the children one last time. Then he stood up and asked everyone to say a final prayer before leaving the house and returning to his car.

"Lord," he said softly, "help us honor our dreams every day, and teach us how to forgive those who do not understand. Be with us during the walk — in the good and in the hard times."

He traced the sign of the cross in the air, then hugged each of them in turn. For today, they had done their laundry in peace.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 21-Dec 4, 2025** print issue under the headline: Prayer for laundry: Chicago priest helps Venezuelan migrants navigate risk, fear.