News



Catholics receive Communion outside the ICE Broadview facility during an outdoor Mass, in Broadview, Illinois, outside Chicago Nov. 1. (Courtesy of Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership)



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A coalition of Catholic clergy and sisters filed suit Wednesday (Nov. 19) after federal officials blocked them from entering the Broadview detention center to offer pastoral care and Communion.

For more than a decade, Broadview had been a place where Catholic sisters prayed with detainees each week. That practice, rooted in the persistence of the late Mercy Srs. JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy, ran without incident. But in recent months, faith leaders say their calls, emails and in-person requests to follow protocols of the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement were ignored.

The Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership, or CSPL, represented by attorneys Tom Geoghegan and Patrick V. Dahlstrom, now argues that ICE's refusal violates the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and other federal protections.

CSPL is a Catholic coalition of more than 50 parishes, religious orders, universities and community organizations focused on transforming systemic racial, economic, social and environmental inequities.

Communication from federal officials grew "shifting, contradictory, and opaque," said CSPL executive director Michael N. Okinczyc-Cruz.

"Faced with this lack of honesty and transparency, we were left with no choice but to file this lawsuit," he said.

The suit follows a sharp turn in September, during the so-called "Operation Midway Blitz," when officers in camouflage dispersed prayer groups and new fencing barred clergy from areas once open to them. ICE, the suit states, denied access to the Broadview facility and made reference to "safety and security concerns," which clergy members dispute.

"The only danger was to their false claims about arresting the 'worst of the worst,' " said Fr. Dan Hartnett, citing emerging data showing that only 16 of more than 600 people detained in the Chicago area during recent operations had criminal histories.

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The plaintiffs include Frs. Hartnett, Larry Dowling and Dennis Berry along with Felician Sr. Jeremy Midura. All have lengthy experience ministering in jails and detention centers. They requested entry for only a small, trained delegation and offered to observe all standard security rules — access that had been routine under multiple administrations.

The case carries added weight after the death last week (Nov. 14) of Sr. JoAnn Persch, 91, long the face of Catholic ministry at Broadview. On Nov. 1, she joined a CSPL delegation during an outdoor All Saints' Day Mass. When the group asked to bring Communion inside, she said: "The answer was no."

Some clergy argue the issue is not safety but secrecy. "Perhaps they don’t want to allow us in because they know the conditions inside are inhumane," said Jesuit Fr. David Inczauskis.

"We cannot be silent in the face of oppression," he said.

The lawsuit asks the court to strike down the restrictions and restore reasonable religious access for detainees who request it.

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

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