News



Fr. Dennis Berry, center, and Felician Sr. Jeremy Midura, left, talk to a Department of Homeland Security official outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Chicago field office, Dec. 19. (Courtesy of Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership/Bryan Sebastian)



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Catholic religious and others last week made a public appeal amid the cold outside a federal office building in Chicago: They wanted permission to bring Communion and pastoral care to immigration detainees on Christmas.

According to the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership, over 50 Catholic priests, women religious and coalition members gathered Friday morning (Dec. 19) outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Chicago field office. After prayers and Advent hymns, a small delegation — a priest, a religious sister and a deacon — delivered a letter asking Immigration and Customs Enforcement to allow pastoral access to the Broadview ICE detention facility on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

A press release about the group's request noted that Department of Homeland Security representatives walked outside the building and accepted the letter, saying it would be delivered to ICE agents. But as of Monday, Dec. 22, ICE had not responded to the group's written requests sent Dec. 17 and 18, and it did not give permission for pastoral visits during Christmas.

"Christmas is the day we celebrate God entering the world in human flesh, a day when no one should be abandoned or left without the comfort of faith," said Felician Sr. Jeremy Midura, member of the coalition's Women Religious Council. "Every human being has a sacred right to pastoral care, especially on Christmas. We followed every required protocol respectfully. But in the face of silence, we are making this request public. We want an answer. We deserve an answer."



Catholic activists gather outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Chicago field office to request permission to bring Communion to detainees, Dec. 19. (Courtesy of Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership/Bryan Sebastian)

Jesuit Fr. Dan Hartnett, member of the Clergy Council of the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership, stressed that Advent is "rooted in the truth that God enters human history when people are hurting, displaced and afraid. And that is exactly what we see today as families are ripped apart during the most sacred weeks of our faith."

The coalition's leaders noted in their release that pastoral access to the Broadview facility was allowed in previous years. They also pointed to federal detention standards that explicitly guarantee detainees the right to religious practice and access to chaplaincy services.

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The current standoff comes against the backdrop of ongoing litigation. On Nov. 19, the group filed a lawsuit against the federal government after being barred from the Broadview facility, arguing that the denial of pastoral access violates religious freedom protections. That case, now pending in U.S. District Court, outlined the coalition's claim that ICE's actions represent a sharp break from long-standing practice and policy.

Leaders of the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership said Dec. 19 that the lawsuit does not prevent ICE from acting now. Granting access for Christmas, they said, would not require a court order — only a decision.

"Those inside Broadview are not numbers, not cases, not paperwork," Midura said. "They are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, children of God."

"We will keep knocking," Hartnett said. "Just as the Holy Family once did."

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