News



Dylan Lopez Contreras wears an ankle monitor during a press conference to welcome him home after being freed from ICE detention, March 19, 2026 in New York. Catholics in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, are wearing faux ankle monitors in solidarity with migrants. (AP photo/Adam Gray)



by Nancy Fitzgerald

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About a mile from Pennsylvania's state capitol,* Latinos live in most of the red-brick row homes built in the 1940s that are a prime target for immigration enforcement laws.

Local Catholics do what they can with food kitchen and other outreach programs.* But sometimes it's not quite enough, especially when people in the area have been arrested or detained.

There are smaller, everyday indignities, too. One 46-year-old woman who is a legal asylum-seeker from South America, is among the latest to get more than a stamp and a return appointment at her regular immigration check-in. The woman, who did not want her name used, was presented with an ankle monitor and instructed to wear it 24 hours a day, wherever she goes. She left the office in tears. She is not a criminal: She's a wife and mom, a worker and a migrant.

According to The Washington Post, United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement issued a memo in June instructing personnel to use ankle monitoring "wherever possible" on those enrolled in its Alternatives to Detention program. More than 180,000 of them are potentially vulnerable to these surveillance measures.



In this 2008 photo, women show ankle cuffs with a GPS tracking device Nov. 8 at St. Bridget Catholic Church in Postville, Iowa. People at the church heard testimony about a May 12 immigration raid at the Agriprocessors kosher meat packing plant in Postville. The women were arrested but allowed to return home wearing the ankle cuffs until their hearing. (CNS/The Witness/Sr. Carol Hoverman)

The woman from South America is now dealing with a similar situation. Just a few weeks earlier, she'd broken her right ankle and now this added insult to injury. "It was terrible for me," she told the National Catholic Reporter. "The monitor was very heavy and pulled on my leg, and it was difficult to sleep at night. It was hard to navigate stairs with a boot on one ankle and the monitor on the other. It even caused a rash on my skin."

But the hardest part was the way people responded. "People at my work asked, 'Do you have a criminal case?' I would reply that it was for immigration, but they looked at me differently," she said.

Her experience weighed on her friends at the local Catholic Worker house,* who meet after weekday Mass to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. "One day, Patrick, one of our Protestant friends, said, 'We should all wear ankle monitors,' " said Heather Kelly, who lives in the Harrisburg area. "It was an offhand remark, but we knew he was on to something. It all happened very organically."



Assortment of imitation ankle monitors made by Renée Roden in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Nancy Fitzgerald)

So Renée Roden, a community member of Harrisburg's St. Martin de Porres Catholic Worker, cobbled together faux ankle bracelets from strips of Velcro, super glue and small plastic boxes with rosary beads tucked inside. Now they're being worn to work, to Mass, even to the airport by local Catholics as an act of solidarity with their migrant sisters and brothers. "When we wear these, especially during Lent and even Holy Week," explains Roden, "we're echoing what Jesus did during his entire ministry. We're standing up against injustice. We are carrying the cross with Jesus."

The symbolic act was especially meaningful this Lent, said Lisa Neuhauser, who leads the migrant justice ministry at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Palmyra. "Jesus was a resister, and he was showing the people back then that sometimes you have to stand up for what's right. I think that Holy Week is the perfect time for this act of holy resistance. When our group wears these ankle monitors, we're following what Jesus did for the poor and vulnerable of his day."

Jesuit Fr. Brian Strassburger, director of the Del Camino Jesuit Border Ministries in Brownsville, Texas, agrees. "As people of faith," he said, "we should be shaken and disturbed to see our government's enforcement strategies, from detention to other inhumane alternatives like ankle monitors strapped to the legs of migrants."

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For Catholics like Heather Kelly, wearing one of these homemade devices has become more than a statement. She said it's a powerful reminder to pray for her migrant friends and to raise awareness on immigration issues. It's a chance to talk about what Rick Bentz, a lifelong Catholic who lives in the Harrisburg Diocese, has called the church's best-kept secret: social justice teaching.

Meantime, the Harrisburg woman is still wearing a surveillance device, though her ankle monitor has been replaced by something she wears on her wrist. "It smells from cooking," she said, "and it irritates and cuts my wrist." She also constantly worries about keeping it charged.

Still, her friends at the Catholic Worker house — and the wider community in Harrisburg — stand with her, strapping on their Velcro monitors every morning as they pray for her and for all migrants.

**This story has been updated to remove geographical details out of concern for immigrants.*

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