News
Ann Lawani, assistant professor at the University of San Francisco School of Nursing and Heal

Ann Lawani, assistant professor at the University of San Francisco School of Nursing and Health Professions, was detained by ICE Sept. 16 and is being held in Louisiana. (Courtesy of University of San Francisco)



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

November 25, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On a rain-soaked morning in San Francisco, members of the University of San Francisco community gathered to pray for a woman who could not be there. Before leaving, they were invited to take home a small electronic candle, a reminder of a colleague and teacher being held thousands of miles away.

Jesuit Fr. Dónal Godfrey, the university chaplain who presided over the Nov. 18 prayer vigil, recalled an Irish Christmas Eve tradition of placing a candle in the window as a sign of welcome to Mary and the unborn Jesus seeking shelter.

For the Jesuit Catholic university, that gesture was an invitation to remember Ann Lawani, a nursing professor who has been in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody for more than two months.

Lawani, 39, was detained Sept. 16 outside her home in Lodi, California, and remains in an immigration detention facility in Louisiana, according to Eileen Fry-Bowers, dean of the university's School of Nursing and Health Professions.

Her detention was first made public by The New York Times on Nov. 10, in a report examining how immigrants in federal custody had become increasingly difficult for their families and lawyers to locate. Lawani's family had initially sought privacy, but the news prompted an outpouring of support from students, colleagues and elected officials.

An attendee holds the prayer vigil booklet and music score for a service organized at the Univ

An attendee holds the prayer vigil booklet and music score for a service organized at the University of San Francisco in support of Ann Lawani Nov. 18. (Courtesy of University of San Francisco)

Despite the heavy rain, students and faculty gathered at the university's Nano Nagle Hall Nov. 18 to pray for Lawani and others who have been detained. They sang hymns, including the peace prayer traditionally associated with St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of both the university and the city. Lawani's brother, Sam, joined the vigil remotely.

"It's so important to come together to pray, to keep Ann in our hearts," Godfrey told the National Catholic Reporter. "We're a Jesuit school. The Catholic social teaching and the dignity of each human being, whatever their legal status, is important."

Godfrey also chose a poem by Irish writer John O'Donohue about the vocation of nursing, particularly the care of those approaching death — a fitting tribute to Lawani, whose expertise is in hospice and palliative care.

"Remind them in the dark that they are not forgotten; that hope still holds them," Godfrey read.

An educator in detention

Born in Nigeria, Lawani has lived in the United States for nearly two decades. She joined USF's faculty in 2023 and directs its master's entry nursing program. She also works as a nurse at John Muir Health and cares for her 83-year-old father.

In an Oct. 20 letter to the Department of Homeland Security, Democratic Rep. Josh Harder of California said Lawani had no criminal history, was authorized to work and had been granted protection from removal to Nigeria in 2013 because of the risk of persecution there.

DHS, however, has defended Lawani's detention, telling The San Francisco Standard that she overstayed her authorized admission in 2007 and was subject to a removal order. The agency said a work permit does not confer legal immigration status.

Jesuit Fr. Dónal Godfrey leads a prayer vigil at the University of San Francisco organized in su

Jesuit Fr. Dónal Godfrey leads a prayer vigil at the University of San Francisco organized in support of Ann Lawani, detained by ICE, Nov. 18. (Courtesy of University of San Francisco)

According to Harder's letter, immigration authorities had reportedly sought to deport Lawani to a third country, but a federal judge barred her removal while a petition challenging her detention remained pending.

Fry-Bowers has been in contact with Lawani's family since the day of her arrest, helping them obtain legal representation. She said they have become like family to her.

On Nov. 14, the nursing school dean received an unexpected phone call from Lawani, their first conversation since her arrest. The connection was poor, and they had only a few minutes to speak.

The professor's first question, the dean recalled, was: "How is everybody holding up?"

"What are they doing that for? They should be studying," Lawani responded, when told about the efforts her students were making on social media to secure her release.

Fry-Bowers, who taught Lawani during her graduate studies, described her former student as an exceptional educator with a deep commitment to vulnerable patients. Lawani oversees a program serving more than 230 nursing students, including coordinating clinical placements and faculty. She was also scheduled to teach a new course on palliative care.

"When she was taken from us, that left a huge hole in our school," the dean said.

Advertisement

"She is an extraordinary instructor of nursing," Fry-Bowers said. "She has a wonderful way of communicating with students, of making the complexity of nursing care attainable and accessible to her students," she added. "I think that she embodies what we want nurses to hold dear in terms of our ethics and our commitment to providing the best possible care."

An absence felt by students

For Santino Vattuone, a 26-year-old graduate nursing student, Lawani's absence is both academic and personal. He first met her during orientation in August 2025 and later worked with her. "She cares deeply for her students, and the impact of her not being around is definitely being felt greatly throughout the program," he said.

When he learned from a university announcement that Lawani had been detained, Vattuone immediately called his classmates. None had imagined that immigration detention was the reason for her extended absence since mid September.

He attended the prayer vigil, grateful for the opportunity to stand alongside others who shared his concern, but troubled by the thought of Lawani's confinement.

"It was a very heavy ceremony," he said.

The university has appointed interim leadership for Lawani's program while advocating for her return. Fry-Bowers said more than 95 students had written letters of support, joining university leaders in attesting to the professor's contributions. A petition and fundraising campaign are also underway.

On Nov. 16, the American Nurses Association and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing jointly called for her release.

For Godfrey, the vigil was also an opportunity to remember immigrants who remain in detention without the kind of community mobilizing on Lawani's behalf.

The Jesuit, an immigrant from Ireland, has joined other clergy outside ICE offices in San Francisco and supported undocumented students at USF. He said his priestly

vocation calls him to offer solidarity even when he cannot change the political circumstances that cause suffering.

"I refuse to normalize it," he said of the suffering inflicted on immigrants. He acknowledged that the present political climate challenges even his own faith.

"It seems like sometimes we're living in Good Friday, but of course Easter hope is always there," he said.

This article is supported by The Bertelsen Fund for Excellence in Catholic Journalism.

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