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Mercy sisters call for end to deportations

by Heidi Schlumpf



The Sisters of Mercy want to stop deportations of most undocumented migrants to the United States.. (Photo courtesy Sisters of Mercy)

CHICAGO -- Hundreds of silhouettes were planted like garage sale signs on the lawn at St. Xavier University in Chicago, the white writing on the black paper giving only the name and country of an immigrant recently deported or facing deportation. These faces represented only a fraction of the nearly 400,000 people deported from the United States every year, but behind each was a story of a family torn apart.

The number of deportations has risen under the Obama Administration, prompting faith-based organizations to advocate for families being ripped apart by the process.

Like Brian, an American citizen whose wife from Bulgaria and her father are scheduled to be deported for overstaying their visas. Already a brother-in-law has been sent back, causing him to lose his home in Arlington Heights, Ill.

"One morning we woke up to the American dream being crushed," Brian told those gathered for a June 25

protest against deportations. The Sisters of Mercy sponsored the event. "I had no idea the complexity of immigration laws and what they're doing to American citizens as well as the undocumented who have worked so hard to stay here."

Or Carla, who has lived in the U.S. since she was 5, when her family came here from the Philippines on a tourist visa, not intending to stay. An honor student, she quit college because her undocumented status prevented her from becoming a teacher. The recent passage of the "Dream Act" in Illinois offers some hope, she says. "But there are still so many families living in the shadows, including my parents. I still live every day in fear that they could be deported, or I could be deported."

Or Rosa, whose son faces deportation proceedings and was scheduled to speak but who had been detained after a car accident for having a false driver's license. Instead another mother, Anna, tearfully told how her adult son had been recently taken to Texas to be returned to Mexico, while his wife remains here grieving.

"We are not criminals," she said through a translator. "We came to work to provide our families the best opportunity so they can have a better future."

The Sisters of Mercy have joined with the Interfaith Immigration Council to urge the current administration to prevent or defer removals, interpret the law as compassionately as possible and revisit current policies. As part of the "Let My People Go" campaign, sisters in Chicago for the order's general chapter meeting wrote letters to the president and other government officials arguing for change in the current deportation policy.



The "public witness," which drew nearly 300 sisters from North,

South and Central America as well as members of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Eighth Day Center for Justice and the Chicago Archdiocesan Office of Immigrant Affairs, was an opportunity to publicly call for change and stand in solidarity with undocumented immigrants.

Sisters of Mercy also stand in solidarity through a number of ministries to undocumented persons. The organizers of the Chicago event, Sr. JoAnn Persch and Sr. Pat Murphy, visit detained men and women as part of an interfaith group that provides pastoral counseling. Every Friday they get up at 3 a.m. to meet and pray with deportees before they are loaded, shackled, onto buses to O'Hare Airport.

"It's so sad to watch men and women being moved around like chess pieces on a board," says Persch, who risked arrest in 2009 to bring attention to the need for detained immigrants to have access to pastoral visitors in Illinois.

In New Jersey, detainees are not allowed such visits, so Sr. Diane Guerin joins a group that prays outside the detention center. "We feel a responsibility, since we as a nation created the immigration problem," she says. "We turned a blind eye while they did the jobs we wouldn't do. Now we say, 'Get out.'"

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In the current economic crisis, immigrants have become a convenient scapegoat, says Sr. Karen Donahue of Detroit, who is working for comprehensive immigration reform that would include changing trade agreements that destroy local economies so people are compelled emigrate to support their families. "And with the growth of for-profit prisons in the United States, immigrants provide a steady stream of inmates," she says.

Sr. Denise Sausville also wants comprehensive reform, but believes deportation is the most urgent focus now. "We're seeing this on a scale we've never seen before," says Sausville, who works with a shelter just over the border in South Texas, where deportees are dropped off to cross a bridge into Mexico. "The shelter was created for immigrants going north, but now we're seeing more people going south."

Helping these fractured families is part of their witness to the Gospel of Jesus, said Sr. Mary Waskowiak, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. "We Sisters of Mercy came to this country 150 years ago as immigrants and we have worked with immigrant people since that time," she told the protest crowd. "We will not stop until they have the justice that is properly theirs."

Others can join the Sisters of Mercy in their advocacy through the "Let My People Stay" campaign at www.sistersofmercy.org.

The Sisters of Mercy is the largest order of women religious in the United States, comprised of six communities with more than 3,800 sisters who serve in North, South and Central America, the Caribbean, Guam and the Philippines. In addition, more than 3,100 associates and more than 960 Mercy Volunteer Corp alumni and other co-workers help the Sisters of Mercy with their mission of serving people who suffer from poverty, sickness and lack of education, with special concern for women and children.

[Heidi Schlumpf is an *NCR* columnist and contributor.]



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