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Immigrants in Georgia, Alabama worried about effects of new laws

by Andrew Nelson by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

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Demonstrators voice their opposition to proposed immigration enforcement bills March 24 in Atlanta. (CNS photo/ Michael Alexander, Georgia Bulletin) (April 5, 2011)

DALTON, Ga. -- Latin rhythms played by the two guitarists, a drummer and three women singers spilled out of the parish hall at St. Joseph Church in Dalton.

Hundreds of women, men and children swayed, raised their hands in prayer and danced to the loud, upbeat music.

"This is our strength," Roxana Quezada said, referring to how the community is dealing with the tense atmosphere surrounding immigration issues in the community.

"We know God is here for us," said Quezada, 25, a former illegal immigrant who is now a naturalized American. She works as a licensed practical nurse and is a mother of one with a second child on the way.

A drop in Mass attendance, divisions in the faith community, fear: That's the situation facing Catholics in northwest Georgia as they confront the tough new state immigration law. Pastors are seeing their Hispanic parishioners wrestle with its impact.

There are similar fears next door in Alabama. The Birmingham News daily newspaper reported

anecdotally that many immigrants appear to be leaving the state in advance of its immigration enforcement law. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that about 120,000 undocumented immigrants live in Alabama.

In Georgia, provisions of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act law, which took effect July 1, include authorizing police to check the immigration status of criminal suspects who cannot provide a valid Georgia driver's license or other specified identity documents. While a U.S. District Court judge granted an injunction blocking that action by police and another provision, the rest of the law remained intact.

In Alabama, a coalition of immigrant advocates is seeking an injunction for a tough immigration law there that among other things allows police to detain anyone they suspect is undocumented and mandates criminal penalties for people who transport undocumented migrants. It is to take effect Sept. 1.

At his Georgia church, Fr. Paul Williams, pastor of St. Joseph, commented that immigrants "were outgrowing" the parish hall, "but the state of Georgia has taken care of our growth problem."

His concern about the effects of the law moved him to cancel a multi-parish prayer service scheduled for the fall at the local civic center. He told The Georgia Bulletin, newspaper of the Atlanta archdiocese, that he feared driving to the event would be detained at roadblocks.

The injunction by U.S. District Court Judge Thomas Thrash Jr. blocking parts of the law also stopped the provision that would have penalized people who knowingly transport or harbor illegal immigrants.

Georgia is appealing the ruling. Supporters of the law say the state is forced to confront immigration problems because the federal government is ignoring them.

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Georgia ranks in the top 10 states for undocumented immigrants, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. The number peaked at an estimated 457,000 in 2007 but has declined with the economic downturn, to 425,000 in 2010, Pew estimates.

At the same time, the Hispanic community also increased the numbers of Catholics in the Atlanta archdiocese. With an estimated 1 million members in 69 counties, nearly half of the archdiocese is believed to be Hispanic.

In Alabama, one provision of its immigration law in particular -- it makes it a crime to transport someone who is in the country illegally -- led Mobile Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi and Birmingham Bishop Robert J. Baker to warn in April that the legislation as it stands would interfere with free exercise of religion by "criminalizing our Gospel imperative of serving the poor."

In an article written for the July 8 edition of the Catholic Week, newspaper of the Mobile archdiocese, Vincentian Fr. John E. Kane, director of Hispanic ministry, said the state's new law reminds him of living in Panama under a dictatorship.

"If I only had a penny for every time I was stopped and asked for papers," Kane wrote. The new law's requirement that employers use the federal E-Verify program to check for eligibility to work "is the same 'show me your papers' situation, I would be stopped because of the color of my skin, my looks were different, and I spoke with an accent."

Another Alabama priest, Fr. David Shoemaker, wrote in the same issue that he thinks the enthusiastic Pentecost celebration at Holy Redeemer Parish in Eufaula may not be seen again. The Spanish Mass had Baptisms, confirmations and first Communion, he wrote.

"The Holy Spirit was truly present as both children and adults were received into the Catholic church," wrote Shoemaker. "The church was filled to standing-room only as family and friends gathered to share in this joyful occasion. It is moments like this that we can really appreciate the universal nature of the church that reaches out into all languages and cultures."

He wrote that many Hispanics are planning to leave.

"This is not only the undocumented Hispanics but those who have citizenship or visas because they no longer feel safe or welcomed," he wrote. "They fear the harassment and persecution that will come as a result of the new law."

Georgia's Catholic bishops joined other religious leaders in urging support for "comprehensive, federal immigration reform legislation consistent with the values of faith and family that we profess."

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