



BECOMING A "FIELD HOSPITAL" FOR THE WOUNDED

Church Response to 2019 Mississippi ICE Raids

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

*Photo courtesy of
Catholic Extension.*

On August 7, 2019, seven chicken processing plants in six small towns in central Mississippi were the targets of the largest immigration raid in U.S. history. Early that morning 650 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) agents arrested 681 Hispanic workers, restrained the workers in plastic handcuffs, and transported them to a military hanger in Flowood, Mississippi to be "processed." After a terrifying day, 300 workers, mainly women with small children at home, were released with electronic monitoring devices on their ankles. Most of the other workers were transported to immigration detention centers in isolated locations in central Louisiana, three to four hours away.

Numerous organizations—local, regional, and national—became immersed in responding to families and individuals impacted by the raid. This article explores the pivotal role that Mississippi churches and faith-based organizations played in serving the needs of traumatized immigrant families and communities torn apart by the raids, accompanying them in their darkest hours.

Emergency Assistance

The raids occurred on the first day of school, resulting in scores of children being stranded at school or coming home to empty houses. Local church volunteers helped coordinate meeting children after school, many of whom were crying

and distraught. Fr. Michael O'Brien, Pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Canton, MS, stood with parishioners until 4 AM outside the town's chicken processing plant the evening of the raids, waiting for workers to be released.¹

As has been the case with nearly every large immigration raid impacting Latino immigrants in the past 20 years, overnight local churches became emergency response centers for raid victims and their families.² The response to the August 2019 ICE raids was ecumenical in nature. Seven local churches representing three denominations (Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist) served as emergency assistance hubs.³ For weeks after the raids, volunteers, many associated with Jackson-area churches, dropped off carloads of diapers, powdered milk, and canned foods. Non-profits and churches prepared meals for hundreds, and volunteers from many local churches came by daily to serve meals, distribute supplies, and organize after-school activities for the children.⁴ By early September, sites were at capacity for the material donations they could store.⁵

As Dorothy Balsler, Director of Parish and Community Engagement at Catholic Charities Diocese of Jackson (CCDJ), explained to me in a February 2020 interview, cash donations quickly started pouring in to CCDJ and to individual churches in raid-impacted communities. The Catholic Extension Service,

which has long supported Catholic churches in rural Mississippi, made a \$100,000 donation to CCDJ to pay rent and utilities for victim families within days of the raids. Over the next six months, CCDJ received approximately \$150,000 for emergency assistance from individuals and religious communities.⁶

The largest amount of cash assistance to raid victims has come from ActBlue, a web-based giving platform that raises funds for progressive groups and Democratic Party candidates. ActBlue quickly identified six nonprofit organizations for donors to contribute to the Mississippi raids response. By August 15, ActBlue had raised \$915,297 for these organizations.⁷ Several eventually chose to donate part or all of the funding they had received through ActBlue for direct humanitarian support. Members of the Mississippi Immigration Coalition—a group of local, state, and national nonprofits that formed the day of the ICE raids to help coordinate legal services, humanitarian aid, volunteer efforts, and policy advocacy—decided that the organization best suited to distribute the aid was Catholic Charities Diocese of Jackson. By late December, CCDJ had received \$426,630 in ActBlue money through the Coalition, which was distributed at church sites to pay rent and utilities for 376 families (approximately 600 adults and 900 children) impacted by the raids.⁸

Because most of the humanitarian aid funding was due to run out by March, in early 2020 families were increasingly forced to make a difficult decision: remain in central Mississippi, a place many had called home for decades; relocate with family members or friends in other parts of the U.S.; or return to their countries of origin.⁹

Advocacy

Two days after the raids, Mississippi's Episcopal bishop, Methodist bishop, Evangelical Lutheran bishop, and two Catholic bishops released a statement condemning the raids and calling for Christian unity and humanitarian support for raid victims' families, noting "an urgent and critical need at this time to avoid a worsening crisis."¹⁰

Most of the pastors of the churches that became emergency response centers were vocal in their condemnation of the raids and how families, especially children, were being harmed. For example, Fr. Roberto Mena, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Forest, MS, was quoted by several major media organizations about the trauma caused by the raids, including the *New York Times*, *L.A. Times*, *USA Today*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *AP*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *The Economist*.¹¹ At a Congressional hearing on the raids held November 7 at Tougaloo College, Fr. Odel Medina, pastor of St. Anne's Catholic Church in Carthage, MS, read a heart-wrenching letter from the 13 year-old son of a parishioner detained in the raids. Fr. Medina implored Congress to reform our broken immigration system.¹²

Several advocates I spoke with believe that the public visibility of the impact the raids had on children was a major factor in the outpouring of support for raid victim families.

Nevertheless, pastors strove to be apolitical when criticizing the raids. In the 2016 election, Donald Trump won 58 percent of the vote in Mississippi, including at least 56 percent of votes cast in four of the five counties where the raids took place.¹³ Fr. Michael O'Brien told the Catholic News Agency in late August that he wanted his parishioners to put politics aside and help impacted families: "I let the people know in no uncertain terms, these are my parishioners, and my parishioners are in trouble...I didn't give them too much of a choice, you know, either."¹⁴

Other Needs

Legal clinics organized by the Mississippi Immigration Coalition also were held at church parish halls, which additionally served as sites for community information meetings, community organizing, and trauma counseling. Pastoral counseling to confused and traumatized parishioners became a major component of pastors' efforts after the raids as well.¹⁵

Conclusion

Early in his pontificate Pope Francis presented his vision of the Church in the world—that of a "field hospital" for the wounded.¹⁶ Perhaps nowhere has that vision been more fully realized than the church response to the 2019 Mississippi ICE raids.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Amy, J. (2019, August 12). Children at Mississippi Catholic church march to protest their parents' possible deportation. *Associated Press*. Retrieved at <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/08/12/children-mississippi-catholic-church-march-protest-their-parents>.
- 2 See Capps, R., Castañeda, R.M., Chaudy, A., & Santos, R. (2007). Paying the price: The impact of immigration raids on America's children. Urban Institute and National Council of La Raza. Retrieved at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/46811/411566-Paying-the-Price-The-Impact-of-Immigration-Raids-on-America-s-Children.PDF>. Also Gabriel, T. (2018, July 3). An ICE raid leaves an Iowa town divided along faith lines. *New York Times*. Retrieved at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/us/ice-raid-iowa-churches.html>; and Jordan, M. (2018, June 8). ICE came for a Tennessee town's immigrants. The town fought back. *New York Times*. Retrieved at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/11/us/tennessee-immigration-trump.html>.
- 3 Emergency assistance sites in Mississippi were: Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Canton; St. Anne's Catholic Church in Carthage; St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church and Trinity Mission Methodist Center in Forest; Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Laurel and; St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church, and Church of the King Baptist Church. Several churches also became sites for legal clinics, trauma counseling, and community meetings. [From Mississippi Immigration Coalition emails]. The Episcopal and Presbyterian churches in Canton were very supportive of Sacred Heart Church's emergency response, while the Methodist church in Laurel supported Immaculate Conception's work. [From September 3, 2019, email from Dorothy Balsler, Director of Parish and Community Engagement, Catholic Charities Diocese of Jackson.]
- 4 Weishar, S. (2019, September). After the Mississippi ICE raids: Families ask why; Churches respond. *JustSouth Monthly*. Retrieved at http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu.jsri/files/justsouth_monthly_september_2019_weishar.pdf.
- 5 Email from Dorothy Balsler, September 2, 2019.
- 6 Interview with Dorothy Balsler, February 6, 2020.
- 7 The six organizations are El Pueblo in Biloxi, ACLU of Louisiana, MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi Center for Justice, Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, and the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network. From August 19, 2019, Mississippi Immigration Coalition Fundraising Report—ActBlue Campaign, author's files. The Southern Poverty Law Center donated an additional \$50,000, making the total \$965,297 by August 19, 2019.

—Endnotes continued on page 8

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ACA - ENDNOTES

—Continued from page 2

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- 10 For details concerning Medicare for All go to the website of Physicians for a National Health Program: pnhp.org. For a list of organizations that have endorsed Medicare for All: medicare4allresolutions.org/endorsing-organizations.
- 11 United States Catholic Conference. (1981, November 19). *Health and Health Care: A Pastoral Letter of the American Catholic Bishops*, 5.
- 12 Wooden, C. (2016, May 9). Health care is a right, not a privilege, Pope says. Catholic News Service. Retrieved March 4, 2020: <https://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/health-care-is-a-right-not-a-privilege-pope-says.cfm>.

ICE - ENDNOTES

—Continued from page 5

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- 10 Davis, A. (2019, August 9). Joint statement from Mississippi religious leaders regarding ICE raids. *News Mississippi*. Retrieved at <https://newsms.fm/joint-statement-from-mississippi-religious-leaders-regarding-ice-raids/>.
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