



OF TEARS AND TERROR: Families Torn Apart By Community Raids in th



Erlin San Martin Gomez speaks about his experience as a victim of a CARI raid at the Nuns Rally for Immigration Reform, the front lawn of Loyola University, November 23, 2013. To his right is Fernando Lopez Sanchez, an organizer with the Congress of Day Laborers, who translated for San Martin.

Photo by Andrea Malby, courtesy of *The New Orleans Advocate*.

The family holds a central place in Catholic Social Teaching. Key Church teachings describe the family as “the sanctuary of life,”¹ the “essential cell of human society,”² and the “domestic Church.”³ Given the primacy of the family in the spiritual, ethical, social, and emotional formation of children, the unprecedented increase in deportations since President Obama took office is deeply disturbing. An Urban Institute study found that one child was left behind for every two immigrants apprehended by immigration authorities in worksite raids.⁴ Approximately 1,100 immigrants are being deported a day—causing profound grief, anguish, and hardship for tens of thousands of children a year. If the current pace of deportations continues, the Obama administration will have deported more than 2 million immigrants by the end of 2014, a deplorable record for an American president.⁵

President Obama’s “get tough” attitude on immigration enforcement apparently was intended to

create the political space for compromise with Republicans in reforming our nation’s badly broken immigration system, but clearly that strategy has failed as Republicans continue to insist they cannot “trust” the president on immigration reform.⁶ In the meantime families continue to suffer the tragic loss of their fathers and mothers.

A recent report by the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) casts light on the cruelties local immigrant families have had to endure during the recent escalation in immigration enforcement actions in the New Orleans area.⁷

According to the NOWCRJ report, on August 16, 2013, immigrant Jimmy Barraza and his wife were unloading groceries in front of their apartment in Metairie when five to seven Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) agents approached the couple with guns drawn. When Barraza’s U.S. citizen stepson came out of the apartment to attempt to translate for his parents, an ICE agent shoved him against the wall, pinned his hand back, and handcuffed him. His mother called out, “For God’s sake, let him go.” An ICE agent responded: “There’s no God here. I’m the only one in charge here.” Barraza was fingerprinted with a mobile fingerprint device developed by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan in the back of an ICE van. When his fingerprint check showed a previous deportation order, he was handcuffed and then driven around in the back of the van for hours while ICE agents searched for other immigrants in the area.⁸

On June 26, 2013, Omar Victoriano German was participating in a weekly Bible study group in Chalmette with about 12 other people, including women and children, when ICE agents wearing bulletproof vests began pounding on the door searching for the driver of a van parked nearby.

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BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

When one member of the group opened the door, ICE agents rushed in and ordered everyone, including women and children, outside. As the group stood about with their Bibles still in their hands, the men were separated from the women and fingerprinted by a mobile fingerprinting device in an ICE SUV. German was handcuffed when his record came up showing he had been detained by immigration authorities in 2005. As German was placed in an ICE van, his 4-year-old daughter, crying uncontrollably, tried to get in the van with her father.⁹

Irma Esperanza Lemus and her husband were packing up the car to leave for a fishing trip with their three children on September 25, 2013, when ICE agents, wearing bulletproof vests and holstered guns, came to their apartment door and began asking them about their immigration status. Both she and her husband, Wilmer, were fingerprinted in an ICE van in front of their house. Irma was found to have a previous deportation order and was handcuffed and led away in front of her husband and three children. The baby began to cry, as did Irma. An ICE agent asked her, "What are you crying about?" Irma responded: "You're really asking me that? My children are very young. You're separating me from them, and they're watching while you do it." The agent responded: "But you aren't from here. This isn't your country."¹⁰

One of the hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality is using one's imagination in prayer and reading Scripture. I ask the reader to use Ignatius's method of imagining and place oneself fully within the stories above as a way of seeking the "truth of the heart" rather than just the "truth of the facts." Imagine you are the little girl at the Bible study and suddenly you see your father handcuffed and taken away by strangers in uniforms. Or imagine you are the mother who only moments

before was savoring the thought of a peaceful day fishing with your family but now are terrified you may never see your children again. What does it feel like when you see five men approach you with guns drawn, your son shoved and handcuffed by federal agents, and your prayer for mercy mocked? Then imagine scenes like these occurring hundreds of times a day across the United States.

While advocating for the release of Erlin San Martin Gomez, who was caught up in recent raids in the New Orleans area, the NOWCRJ learned what was behind the escalation in ICE enforcement in New Orleans. A document in Gomez's ICE file revealed that his arrest had taken place as part of a hitherto unknown initiative between ICE and local law enforcement agencies, referred to in an ICE memo as the Criminal Alien Removal Initiative (CARI). That memo in Gomez's file was the first public evidence of the program.¹¹

Although ICE officials have since maintained that CARI raids go after specific "criminal" suspects, it is important to note that ICE includes within its definition of "criminal aliens" those whose sole legal transgressions are prior deportation orders. An ICE official admitted to an *AlJazeera* reporter that immigration agents will also handcuff and fingerprint people in "the area around criminal suspects."¹² This fact turns supposedly "targeted" enforcement action into the kind of race-based "stop and frisk" community raids that have been terrorizing New Orleans area immigrants since June 2013. Sadly, local law enforcement officials have been willing participants in the CARI raids.

The harm immigrant enforcement actions like CARI raids have inflicted upon immigrant families is incalculable. How much longer must families and communities suffer the tragic consequences of a broken political process?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2009, p. 468.
- 2 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2009, p. 133.
- 3 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in *ibid.* p. 333.
- 4 Randy Capps, Rosa Maria Castañeda, Ajay Chaudry, and Robert Santos, *Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America's Children*, A Report by The Urban Institute for the National Council of La Raza, 2007.
- 5 Sally Kohn, "Obama Could Legally Stop Immigrant Deportations," *The Daily Beast*, February 11, 2014.
- 6 Lisa Mascaro and Brian Bennett, "Republicans back away from immigration reform," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2014.
- 7 Saket Soni, Jacinta Gonzalez, Jennifer J. Rosenbaum, and Fernando Lopez, *The Criminal Alien Removal Initiative in New Orleans: The Obama Administration's Brutal New Frontier in Immigration Enforcement*, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, December 2013.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 12 Paul Abowd, *Immigration police pilot 'stop and frisk'-style raids in New Orleans*, www.aljazeera.com, January 29, 2014.
- 13 See *Text of Republicans' Principles on Immigration*, *New York Times*, January 30, 2014, at www.nytimes.com/2014/01/31/us/politics/text-of-republicans-principles-on-immigration.html?_r=0