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## After the Mississippi ICE Raids: Families Ask Why; Churches Respond

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

On August 7 the largest immigrant raid in U.S. history targeted seven chicken processing plants in six small towns in central Mississippi. Early that morning 650 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.

### JSRI Future Activities

#### October 8-9

Fr. Kammer will present the JSRI Houston social analysis report to students at Strake Jesuits College Prep in Houston.

#### October 16

Fr. Kammer will present reflections on social research to Jesuit university centers meeting at the University of San Francisco (by Skype).

### JSRI Recent Activities

#### August 23

Dr. Sue Weishar was quoted in a [Maroon article](#) by Andres Fuentes about the impact of ICE arrests in St. Charles Parish.

#### August 28

Dr. Dennis Kalob attended the monthly meeting of the activist organization, Step Up Louisiana.

#### August 29

Dr. Weishar participated in Fall Service Learning Fair to recruit Loyola students to volunteer with Café con Ingles, an ESL program at St. Anthony of Padua Church she has co-directed since 2011.

August 30

#### September 8

Dr. Weishar traveled to the site of massive ICE raids in central Mississippi to assist with legal intakes and interview family members of raid victims.

#### September 9

Fr. Kammer gave the keynote address at the Jesuit Parish Justice Summit sponsored by the Ignatian Solidarity Network in Morristown, NJ.

#### September 15

At the first Café con Ingles session of the Fall 2019 semester, Dr. Weishar trained and oriented 12 Loyola student volunteers.

#### September 17

Dr. Kalob facilitated a planning meeting at Loyola for the commemoration in November of the 30th anniversary of the assassination of six Jesuit priests and two of their companions in El Salvador.

#### September 23

Dr. Kalob gave a guest lecture in Dr. Al Alcazar's *Environment and Spirituality* course at Loyola. The title of the presentation: “The Socio-Economic and Political Context of *Laudato Si*”

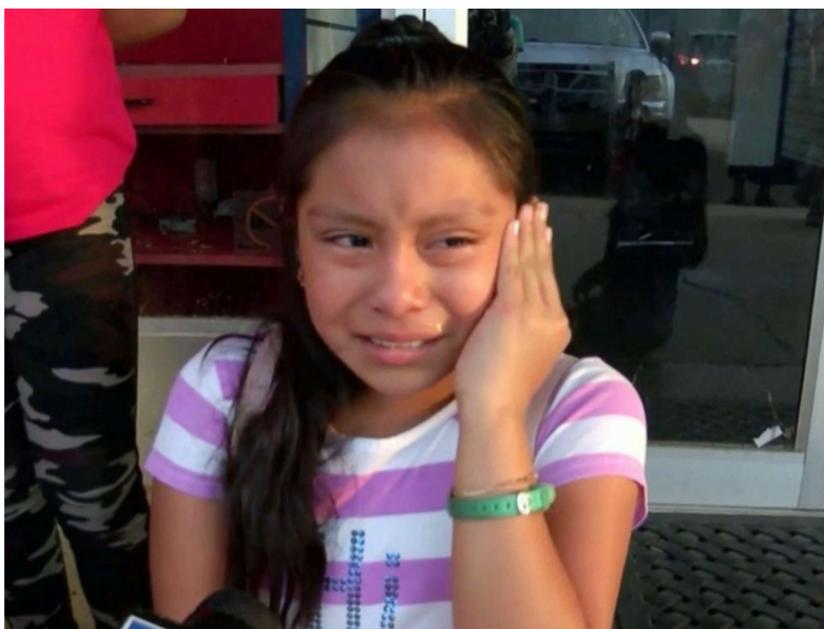
#### September 23

Fr. Kammer participated in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps board meeting in NYC.

#### September 25

Dr. Kalob attended the Step Up Louisiana monthly meeting.

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Magdalena Gomez Gregorio, 11, cries while talking to reporters about her father, who was arrested by ICE agents during a raid in Mississippi on Aug. 7, 2019. via ABC News.

A week ago, I accompanied Mary Townsend, Executive Director of El Pueblo, a Biloxi nonprofit that provides immigration legal services, to three Catholic churches near the raid sites. Overnight, Sacred Heart Church in Canton, St. Anne's Church in Carthage, and St. Michael's Church in Forest had become emergency response centers for raid victims and their families. Sr. Mary Anne Poeschl, RSM, a volunteer at Sacred Heart, told me that the local communities' response to the raids has been overwhelmingly supportive of the immigrant community. Four weeks later, residents continue to drop off carloads of diapers, powdered milk, and canned foods; Jackson-area non-profits and churches prepare meals for hundreds; and volunteers from many local church denominations come by daily to volunteer with serving meals, distributing supplies, and organizing after-school activities for the children. Within two days of the raids, legal intake clinics organized by the Mississippi Immigration Coalition were also being held at the church sites.

Blanca Peralta, the indefatigable Director of Hispanic Ministry at Sacred Heart, recommended that I speak with a woman, Gabriela Rivera [1], whose husband had been arrested during the raid. Their home, a tidy yellow house with bright green shutters on a corner wooded lot, was not far from Sacred Heart on a shady street of modest homes. A late model SUV was in the driveway and kids' bikes leaned against the house. Soon after Mary and I pulled up, Gabriela came outside to invite us into her spacious home.

She began to tell us how much she and her family enjoyed living in Canton—the tranquility, the many friends, Latino and Americano, hearing birds singing in the mornings. It was a far different life than she and especially her husband, Carlos, had known in Vera Cruz, Mexico. Her husband grew up in an impoverished household where he often went without shoes, food, or milk. Although Carlos had only two years education, he was able to teach himself to read and write. Unlike many of the raid victim families, rent was not a concern for Gabriela and their three children. On his meager salary as a poultry worker, her husband had saved enough money over 15 years to buy their house outright. With tears in her eyes she repeated something I heard many times that week, “Why did this happen? Everyone arrested was working, doing really hard work- pesado. How can people be treated like they are criminales when all they were doing was working to feed their families?”

Gabriela's two oldest boys, ages eleven and eight, came home from school while we were talking. Jonny and Miguel looked at Mary and me with concern until they realized Blanca had sent us. As her youngest son Tomas, a chubby six month-old with shining brown eyes and a shock of black hair, squirmed in her arms, Gabriela's cell phone rang. It was Carlos calling from a detention center in Louisiana, although you would never have known that from the tone of his voice. With the phone on speaker, he happily urged his baby son to respond to his exhortations of ¡Hola papa! Hearing that familiar voice, the baby seemed to lurch toward the phone, smiling and gurgling.

As Mary and I drove away, I shuddered to think that this beautiful child could grow up only knowing his father through phone conversations. Like the hundreds of people whose lives were torn apart by the raids, I could only wonder, “Why, God, why?” I had another question too, “How does such senseless cruelty inflicted upon vulnerable immigrant families make America great again?”

[1] Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect immigrants' anonymity.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu)

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