

**Written Statement of
Father Odel Medina
Pastor, St. Anne Catholic Church
Carthage, Mississippi
Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi**

**For a Field Hearing of the
House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security “Immigration
Raids: Impacts and Aftermath on Mississippi Communities”**

**Thursday, November 7, 2019
Holmes Hall Auditorium
Tougaloo College
Touglao, Mississippi**

I am Father Odel Medina of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity and pastor of St Anne's Catholic Church in Carthage Mississippi, a parish located within the Catholic diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, which is overseen by Most Reverend Joseph Kopacz. On behalf of St Anne's Catholic Church, the local Catholic community and the Catholic diocese of Jackson, I would like to thank the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, as well as Chairman Benny Thompson and Ranking Member Mike Rogers for the opportunity to submit this written statement for the record and testify before the committee at this field hearing. In this statement, I will share the impacts of the recent immigration raids upon St Anne's Catholic Church and the Carthage community as well as the Catholic Church's perspective on immigration enforcement and family unity.

The August 7th immigration raids deeply affected St Anne's Catholic Church and our community. I appear before you today to discuss the impacts on our community, particularly on families, and to offer some policy recommendations to prevent future family separations and devastations of this kind.

I. Human Consequences of August 7th Immigration Raids

On August 7th, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the enforcement branch of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) conducted raids on seven poultry plants operating in the Canton, Carthage, Forest, Laurel and Morton communities here in Mississippi.¹ It is estimated that 680 workers at these sites were apprehended by ICE. In the following days approximately 300 of these individuals were eventually released on "humanitarian grounds"² as almost all had small children who needed care. The additional roughly 400 people were sent to immigrant detention facilities located in Mississippi and Louisiana.

The impact of these immigration raids was and continue to be devastating to our community. Compared to other states in the southeastern United States, Mississippi does not have a large undocumented immigrant community. The Pew Research Center estimates that about 20,000 undocumented immigrants live in Mississippi, approximately 0.7% of the state's total population and 35% of the immigrant population in 2016.³ But while the undocumented immigrant community may not be extremely large, it is an integrated community that has been living and contributing to our local economy, parish and city for many years. To this end, it is estimated that 21% of undocumented adults in Mississippi have been in the country for five or more years, and their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens, represent 1.8 percent of elementary and high school students in the state's public schools.⁴

I see the human dimensions of these statistics in my work at St Anne's Catholic Church, where I am the pastor. There are many hardworking immigrant families who attend

¹ Catherine Shoichet, 680 undocumented immigrants are arrested in Mississippi, CNN, August 8, 2019 available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/07/us/mississippi-immigration-raids/index.html>

² U.S. Department of Justice, Numerous Previously Detained Aliens with Small Children Released on Humanitarian Grounds, August 8, 2019 Press Release available at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdms/pr/numerous-previously-detained-aliens-small-children-released-humanitarian-grounds>

³ U.S. unauthorized immigrant population estimates by state, 2016, Pew Research Center, February 5, 2019, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/interactives/u-s-unauthorized-immigrants-by-state/>

⁴ *Id.*

our church, contribute to the community, worked in the poultry plants and also are members of the parish who had lived in Carthage for many years. While some are documented, many of the parents of these family units are undocumented. Many have U.S. citizen children. Mixed status families, such as these, where the parents may lack immigration status, but the children have legal immigration status and, in many instances, may be U.S. citizens is not new phenomena but instead represents an increasing immigration reality in the United States as we wait for larger immigration reform. Currently there are an estimated four million children living in the United States that are members of mixed status families.⁵ And it is these families who often suffer and did indeed suffer on August 7th. By my count, I estimate that approximately 84 families from our parish have been negatively affected and, in some cases, still separated by the raids.

The day of the raids and several days after- I saw devastated children who were terrified and wondering about their parent's whereabouts, worrying when their parents would return or if they would return at all.

These are the words of "Carlos"⁶ a child who experienced the traumatic separation that I mentioned. Carlos's letter to a judge reflect his experience and feelings. (see attached letter from Carlos). Carlos is the son of parents that were both affected by the raids. Carlos' mother was released with an ankle monitor leaving her unable to work. Carlos' father remains in detention. Carlos' father came to the U.S. 19 years ago at age 16. Both of Carlos's parents are hard workers dedicated to providing a good life for their children and sending whatever funds they earned to their families in Guatemala who live in extremely poor conditions. Carlos' father is also a dedicated leader at my parish, always volunteering to provide landscaping or maintenance assistance and is a member of the church choir. This family exemplifies so many of the families that I have the opportunity to minister to: hard working, family-oriented, community focused. These families experienced hardship and trauma first-hand due to the raids.

But equally important to the human suffering that occurred because of the raids was the resiliency and the strength that was demonstrated by our community. Almost immediately, we understood the needs of families who have been impacted and started collecting supplies and resources that were being donated by the community. St Anne's Catholic Church and several other organizations became organizing points for gathering donations. It was inspiring to see people turn to their faith and their community places of worship for support and spiritual guidance. People sent items from all over: water and groceries and baby supplies. In addition to the supplies collected the needs for the families is quite large: while some were released from ICE custody, many lost their jobs and are in removal proceedings now. Many have lost their jobs at the plant and are dealing with financial concerns and also psychological trauma affecting themselves and their children. But in the midst of this, some of the very people who had been picked up during the raid came back to St. Anne's to help assist us gathering donations. Literally some of those people most impacted stepped up to help others in their community. Leaders like "Maria":

⁵ Randy Capps, Michael Fix and Jie Zong, A Profile of U.S. Children with Unauthorized Immigrant Parents, Migration Policy Institute, January 2016, available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org › ChildrenofUnauthorized-FactSheet-FINAL>

⁶ Name changed to protect confidentiality.

23-year-old “Maria”⁷ came to the U.S. when she was 11 years old to join her mother. Maria attended school and learned to speak fluent English. Even though Maria was eligible for DACA, she did not have the financial resources for her application. Due to a lack of the proper documentation, she was unable to pursue higher education and instead pursued full time employment at a poultry plant where she was working at the time of the ICE raids of August 7, 2019. As members of St. Anne Catholic Church, Maria and 2 other women affected by the raids approached me to see what they could do to help themselves and others who were affected. Even though the experience was extremely difficult, Maria’s deep faith conviction led her to accept my invitation to take a leadership role in the response plan that I created. Maria’s English and Spanish skills, her special organizational abilities and her steadfast spirit have helped to lead the entire St. Anne community through this crisis. Although her own immigration status is uncertain, Maria has not given up being there for the rest of the community.

Another member of the volunteer response team is a father of 5 children that were all born in the U.S. “Luis”⁸ and his family have lived in the U.S. for 17 years. Luis is a skilled mechanic which was his job at one of the poultry plants. Luis was arrested on the day of the raids and was released with an ankle monitor. Luis and his family are dedicated and faithful members of St. Anne Catholic church. Luis is a well-known leader among the Hispanic community. He was one of the first to approach me to ask how he can help. In spite of the uncertainty of his own immigration situation, Luis never hesitated to offer assistance in providing resources for all the families that were affected. One thing that calls attention to Luis is that when donors and charities ask him what he needs, he always asks if they can find him a job because he does not want to be a burden on society or the government.

I highlight the stories of my neighbors and parishioners to remind lawmakers of the very human consequences that result from such actions like the August 7th raids. I am hopeful that today I can raise my voice on behalf of those who are now too afraid or to traumatized to speak about what occurred and how negatively it has impacted their lives’, their families’ and our community. But I also note that individuals like Maria and Luis are precisely the type of people we want in our community as they make us a better more integrated community.

II. Catholic Social Teaching on Welcoming the Newcomer

The Catholic Church in the United States has long advocated for and served immigrants and refugees. This missionary call comes from the perspective of our biblical tradition, which urges us to love, act justly toward, and identify with persons on the margins of society, including newcomers and those on the move, such as migrants and refugees. Our long experience as a pilgrim people in a pilgrim church has made us intimately familiar the experience of being with uprooted, persecuted, and imprisoned.

⁷ Name changed to protect confidentiality.

⁸ Name changed to protect confidentiality.

Many Old Testament narratives speak very directly to the reality of migrants and newcomers. Like many migrants, Jacob's son, Joseph was sold into involuntary servitude and trafficked to a foreign land, Egypt (Gen 37: 18-36), where he became a devoted and trusted servant (Gen 39: 1-6). After being falsely accused by his master's wife, he was imprisoned (Gen 39: 11-20). Pharaoh ultimately found him "endowed with the spirit of God" and put him in charge of the land of Egypt (Gen 41: 37-41). Given a chance to succeed, Joseph more than fulfilled his responsibilities, by saving the people of Egypt and "the whole world" from the effects of a devastating famine (Gen 41: 55-57).

The Catholic Church has repeatedly spoken of the Gospel imperative to protect the rights of refugees, to promote the reunification of families, and to honor the inherent dignity of all migrants, whatever their status. Unfortunately, the modern U.S. immigrant enforcement system represents a far cry from solidarity or communion. It divides us from our brothers and sisters and separates families. We are particularly concerned about family detention and the separation of families through enforcement measures which go against the basic tenets of Catholic social teaching.

This is not to say that we do not acknowledge the role of the government in ensuring public safety and agree that those who are a threat to our community should indeed be a target of immigration enforcement and if necessary, detention. However, our teaching reflects that the role of the government in undertaking efforts to secure its borders and enforce its laws should be humane and just. Enforcement like that which occurred in the work place raids of August 7th contributes to the misconception that all immigrants are criminals and a threat to our unity, security, and well-being and most disturbingly separates families, including US citizen children from their parents while inflicting trauma and fear.

As a community member and leader who witnessed these traumatic effects on immigrant families and children, I urge you to consider our recommendations as set forth below.

II. Policy Recommendations

A. DHS Must Observe and Implement Existing Policies to Protect Children During Raids from Undue Harm

During the August 7th raids, hundreds of the individuals apprehended had school age and in some cases under five-year-old children who were either left at school or without adult care upon arriving home from school the day of the raid. This lack of coordination prompted educators, childcare providers and community volunteers to have to find ways to care for and comfort them and sparked national notice.⁹ While many of the parents have since been released from ICE custody on humanitarian grounds so that they can provide care for their children, there was no plan in place to ensure the well-being and care of the children the day and night of the raid. Some children were in the worst cases, left with strangers due to the lack of planning. ICE's own 2007 guidelines stipulate that before raids that will result in the arrest of 150 or more individuals, ICE should alert and coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Division of Immigration Health Services (DIHS) or with state and local social service entities (if DIHS is

⁹ Ray Sanchez, Their first day of school turned into a nightmare after record immigration raids, CNN, August 8, 2019 available at <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/08/us/mississippi-ice-raids-cnnphotos/index.html>

unavailable).¹⁰ While the government states that it did engage in humanitarian releases based on inquiries of whether those apprehended had children and offered to provide cell phones for parents to contact their children,¹¹ this process was haphazard and still did not prevent several children from being left waiting anxiously for their parents afterschool. Notice to relevant state and local and appropriate child welfare contacts must always occur in these situations. While not condoning the raids themselves, it is vital that all existing policies and procedures should be followed to ensure that children are not more unduly harmed than what will be expected as their parents are being separated from them.

B. Release Individuals Still Detained Due to the August 7th Raid and Enroll Them in Case Management-Focused ATD Programs

While noting the continued concerns with the August 7th raids, I must turn to addressing the current reality of the families who have been continually separated due to the aftermaths of the raids or been financially destabilized due to raids. We as a community are still dealing with trauma, economic insecurity and family separation. As it relates to the approximately 300 individuals remaining in detention, we urge that you reconsider this form of custody and instead consider enrolling those still detained, particularly the parents of children, on alternatives to detention, especially alternatives to detention that involve case management. Many of these individuals have strong community ties given their long-standing presence in the United States. As a result, these individuals have robust incentives to appear in immigration court, and their release to the community with individualized case management services is both appropriate and preserves family unity and human dignity.¹² Enrollment in an alternative to detention that utilizes case management will enable the individual to remain in the community at this time while still engaged in the ongoing immigration process.

Community-based case management alternatives are effective at ensuring compliance, without using electronic monitoring.¹³ For example, the ICE Family Case Management Program (FCMP), that ran from January 2016 through June 2017, had compliance rates of over 99% with court hearings and ICE appointments, all at a cost far below that of detention.¹⁴ Additionally, allowing these individuals to still be present in their community and in their children's lives provides opportunity for family strengthening and stability.

C. Reform the Larger Immigration System to Recognize the Contributions of Immigrants Like My Parishioners at St Anne Catholic Church

¹⁰ Guidelines for Identifying Humanitarian Concerns among Administrative Arrestees When Conducting Worksite Enforcement Operations, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2007 available at <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ice-hum-guidelines.pdf>

¹¹ See U.S. DOJ, *supra* note 2.

¹² USCCB, et al., *The Real Alternatives to Detention*, June 2019, available at <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Real-Alternatives-to-Detention-June-2019-FINAL-v.2.pdf>

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

The larger immigration system in the United States is broken and must be fixed. The Catholic Church has long advocated for bipartisan meaningful legislative reform. But this effort must come now- as the human consequences of our broken immigration system continue to devastate our community and create a culture of fear. We must recognize the human dignity and contributions of immigrants who have lived, worked and worshipped in our community and who are by every measure American but for immigration status. The families that I have served and ministered to at St Anne's have lived in our community for many years, they have American citizen children, they were paying taxes and supporting our local economy. We need to work together to find a way to modernize our immigration system to recognize the human dignity of those living here and find a way for them to move forward with their lives here in the United States without fear of being separated from their families.

III. Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak about our vibrant and strong community and the incredible work of the St Anne's Catholic Church parishioners. I urge you to remember the human consequences of what happened here with the August 7th immigration raids. We are still dealing with the fall out, but we are a strong resilient community. At St Anne's Catholic Church and in the Diocese of Jackson we will continue our work to ensure that our community members and neighbours feel safe and welcome regardless of their immigration status. We welcome your support and urge you all to continue to give meaningful oversight to DHS enforcement policies and work for larger immigration reform.