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Immigration head touts common ground with church

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Jul. 31, 2008

WASHINGTON -- The head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, had to know she was stepping in front of a potentially challenging audience when she agreed to speak to the 2008 National Migration Conference, co-sponsored by four Catholic organizations that aid refugees and immigrants.

Even at 7:30 in the morning, a majority of the 850 participants in the conference -- most of whom work in church-based programs for immigrants and refugees -- made their way to the meeting room July 29 to hear Julie Myers, assistant secretary for ICE in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Dozens of hands shot into the air in response to a call for questions from the audience as Myers concluded remarks that touched on her efforts to deal with illegal immigration "in a humane way."

She also spoke at length about the church's shared interest with ICE in cracking down on human trafficking and in preventing people with a record of human rights violations from settling in the United States.

Session moderator Don Kerwin, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, known as CLINIC, opened the floor to questions. He advised Myers that one big area of concern for the group was ICE's recent enforcement actions, particularly large-scale immigration raids, such as one conducted May 12 in Postville, Iowa.

The first question came from Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri of San Marcos, Guatemala, who asked whether Myers was "conscious of the consequences of deportation on families and on the economies of their home countries."

Most of the nearly 400 people arrested at the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville are Guatemalans. Facing criminal charges of identity theft and with little time to consider alternatives as their cases were fast-tracked through the courts, most accepted plea agreements that will subject them to months of jail time before being deported.

Myers responded by saying Bishop Ramazzini is "one of many people who don't like the laws created by our Congress" that call for deportation of people who are in the United States without valid visas.

She said the U.S. government has created "welcome home" centers in some countries to help people ease back into their homelands and that she's "aware of sad personal stories" of people affected by deportation.

She said she has worked to try to ensure that parents and their small children are not separated by deportation, but blamed Congress for a law that allows no exception to deportation "for people who become parents while in the U.S.," thereby forcing people to either move their children who are U.S. citizens to other countries or split up the family.

Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, was

up next at the microphone, commenting about an apparent disconnect between U.S. immigration policy and its foreign policy, particularly when it comes to the recognition of the human rights of immigrants.

Other questions from the floor dealt with difficulties church workers have in getting access to detained immigrants to provide pastoral care; cases of mothers who are detained away from their small, and in some cases nursing, children; and whether ICE might offer testimony to states and municipalities that are considering immigration-based laws.

Myers responded to each of the questions, though rarely by directly addressing what the questioner raised. Several times she repeated that the laws she enforces are the work of Congress, not ICE. To other questions, such as one about how some of the people arrested in Postville have been treated, she countered that she disagrees with some of what has been reported about the Iowa situation.

"People there made some very sad choices," she said, by coming into the United States illegally, by using false IDs to get work and even by having children in circumstances that further complicated the family's legal status.

The July 28-31 conference was hosted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Relief Services.

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