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Deported wife's absence shadowed ordination

Eloisa Perez-Lozano | Feb. 3, 2012
Immigration and the Church

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Felix Hernandez sits at home Oct. 14 with a photo of him, Cynthia and their second-oldest child, Suje Belen Hernandez, in the background. (Photos by Elo"sa PÈrez-Lozano)

MARSHALLTOWN, IOWA -- March 2009. That was the last time Felix Hernandez saw his wife, Cynthia, in the United States. Immigration and Customs Enforcement picked her up during a raid at her workplace, the former Swift & Company, a meat-processing plant in Marshalltown, for working without documentation. She was deported to Mexico and has been there since.

Originally from Guerrero, Mexico, Felix came to the United States in 1986. He now has permanent U.S. residency and lives in Marshalltown with their four children, ages 16, 14, 8 and 6.

As soon as Cynthia was detained, Felix began searching for a way to keep her in the United States, and after she was deported, a way to bring her back legally. The many immigration lawyers he consulted said that the quickest way would still take 10 to 12 years or longer.

After Cynthia?s deportation, Felix?s immediate challenge was caring for his children as a single parent while working full time for a construction company near Ames.

According to Felix, taking on these various roles alone can be quite difficult at times. ?That?s when you realize how important it is for the wife and husband to be together so in these cases you can help each other out,? he explained.

But Cynthia?s deportation presented Felix with another unique challenge. At the time she was deported, Felix was just months away from being ordained a permanent deacon for the Dubuque archdiocese.

Felix and Cynthia had started the journey to his ordination together years

before. They had studied and participated in the training together. His wife?s support was crucial, an indispensable part of the process. Her deportation raised questions about whether Felix could complete the formation process.

Fortunately, according to Felix, God was with him. ?God wanted me to be ordained without her being there,? he said. In the end, it was Archbishop Jerome Hanus who decided that Felix would be ordained in July 2009. Cynthia received a special award in recognition of her steadfastness during the diaconate training.

Ordination should be a joyous occasion, but Felix remembers having mixed feelings. ?It was one of the most unforgettable and beautiful moments of my life. One part of me was happy, but another part of me needed my wife to be there. I felt incomplete.?

Felix spoke with Cynthia by phone before and after the ceremony. ?She gave me words of encouragement ... [telling me] that God was with me, and that he had always been with us.?

Though comforted by her words, she was still not by his side. It was hard for Felix to deal with her absence. It was even harder, however, to be surrounded by his fellow classmates who could share their happiness with their wives. ?On that occasion, I was sad because everyone was with their spouses, except me,? he said.

Felix now serves as deacon at St. Mary?s Catholic Church in Marshalltown. Once a month, he reads the Gospel during the Spanish Masses and preaches the homily. He also serves at other parishes in the archdiocese when needed.

Felix thinks he has found a way to help the family be reunited faster. They have filed for Cynthia to get a religious visa. That application is still pending.

Felix has many roles to play -- husband, father, provider and deacon -- and keeping a balance is a challenge. ?One of the psalms clearly states that there is time for everything,? he said. ?So if God grants us time, we need to know how to distribute it.?

Duties of a Deacon [1] from Eloisa Perez-Lozano [2] on Vimeo [3].

He calls Cynthia every two or three days and manages to visit her in Mexico a few times a year. Despite the separation, Felix believes God has made his family stronger and more united. ?We have stayed together, my kids and my wife,? he said. ?Though she is not here, we keep in touch.?

Felix stresses to his children that even though their mother is not with them, God is with their family and they have to stay together. ?I have always told them that by being together, we will succeed,? he said. ?Even if it?s the biggest problem in the world, we will succeed.?

[Eloísa Pérez-Lozano is a recent graduate of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University. The story of Deacon Hernandez and his wife form part of her master?s creative component project, which looked at the human side of immigration in the lives of three families in Marshalltown, Iowa.]

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