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San Jose bishop stands with children against parent deportations

Monica Clark | Apr. 11, 2013
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Sixteen-year-old Guadalupe Ramirez lives each day in fear. Like many of her high school classmates, she worries about coming home from class and learning that her parents, who came to the United States without legal documentation when she was 10 months old, have been deported.

"There are kids who go to school and can't concentrate because they live in fear," she said during a "Children's Press Conference" held Tuesday to draw public attention to the ongoing distress in immigrant families. The conference was co-sponsored by the interfaith community organization PACT (People Acting in Community Together) in Santa Clara County and the Catholic church's national Justice for Immigrants [1] campaign. It served as a prelude to the major demonstration for immigration reform that took place Wednesday in Washington and other U.S. cities.

Jose Murillo, a 17-year-old senior with acceptance to the University of Chicago, testified at the press conference about a friend whose mother was deported last year.

"He was devastated," Murillo said. "He started to drink and smoke. One time I came to his house and asked him, 'Why are you acting this way?' He told me, 'I miss my mom.' Deportation destroyed my friend's future."

Over the last four years, California, home to 2 million of the nation's 11 million undocumented immigrants, has seen the most deportations of any state, separating children from their parents and forcing them into the care of relatives or friends.

Such family rupture is caused by "a broken immigration system" and is "immoral," said San Jose Bishop Patrick McGrath during Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church after the press conference. "As your bishop, I cannot adequately express my concern and sorrow to you," he told the teen participants, their families and reform advocates.

Acknowledging the letters many children in the community have been writing to congressional leaders about their fear of being separated from their parents, McGrath said, "I want to add my concerns to theirs. These children cannot wait in silence for justice, nor should they have to wait. The voice of these children, these American children, must be heard.

"They are asking us to advocate for citizenship for their parents and for the 11 million people who have made their home among us, many for as long as 20 years or more. As members of the one body of Christ, we are obligated to stand with our little sisters and brothers."

To make sure members of Congress get the children's messages, PACT launched a teddy bear campaign last month. Children donate a favorite stuffed animal to which they attach a handwritten note about why they want a path to citizenship for their parents.

Some of these have already been delivered to California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Speaker of the House John Boehner, and Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose), the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security. Maritza Maldonado, a PACT leader and member of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, said hundreds more will soon be given to other members of Congress, especially women.

"We hope they will connect as mothers around children," she said. "Kids' voices need to be part of the conversation."

At a time when much of the immigration debate in Washington is focused on increasing border enforcement, McGrath said he is convinced many of the social ills afflicting the immigrant community are "intimately connected" to current enforcement policy that deports working adults with no prior contact with the law. He called for deportation policies that are "more nuanced" and include the right of families to remain intact or to be reunited.

Reform, he said, must also allow those approved for residency to work legally and to travel outside the United States for family and educational purposes. He suggested that some of the billions spent on border protection be transferred to the hiring of additional immigration judges to quickly process the backlog of immigration applications.

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