

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 9, 2013 at 3:37pm

Civil disobedience arrests punctuate immigration reform rally, march

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

Washington — At least eight members of Congress were among 200 people arrested in an act of civil disobedience Tuesday at the conclusion of a rally and march in support of comprehensive immigration reform at the National Mall.

Among the arrested members of Congress, all Democrats, was John Lewis of Georgia, who has been willingly subjecting himself to arrest in pursuit of civil rights since the 1960s, when he was at the side of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

He likened the pursuit of a comprehensive immigration reform to the struggles of 1963, when political leaders told civil rights activists to be patient and "it's not the time."

"I said we will not wait, we cannot be patient," Lewis said at the conclusion of the rally preceding the march. Fifty years later, he continued, "the time is now" for immigration reform. He thanked the crowd, largely of immigrants waving U.S. flags and those of their homelands, many with small children nearby. "I thank you for not giving up, for keeping the faith, for keeping your eyes on the prize."

Some of the immigrants at the rally told Catholic News Service that although they've been to many such events and are frustrated that they're still waiting for immigration reform, they remain hopeful.

Leticia and Alejandro Hernandez of Princess Anne, Md., carried signs explaining that they have been here since 1989 and that this is their home now. They told CNS that because of their undocumented status, they have never been able to travel home to see their parents in Mexico. They have four U.S. citizen children, two of them in college, they said.

Their hope for immigration reform is that it will enable them to get better jobs than the farm labor they do now, which will mean better lives for their children and the chance to travel to see their aging parents.

"We wake up every day in fear of being arrested," Leticia Hernandez said, so they are extremely careful about what they do that might attract any attention from police. But going home to Mexico isn't an option, she said. Their home state of Michoacan is among the most crime-ridden regions, she said, and any attempt to buy land, or start a business would subject them to attention from criminals.

Marta Susana Villacis, a U.S. citizen originally from Ecuador, said she comes to the rallies from her home in Meriden, Conn., in pursuit of laws that will help family and friends. She said she votes with immigration concerns as a top priority and is disappointed that President Barack Obama hasn't been able to come through with his promised reform of immigration laws.

On the stage, Jesuit Fr. Ted Gabrielli of Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles stood alongside several children, who took the microphone to tell their stories. Eleven-year-old Angel Aguilar of Virginia explained that he hasn't been able to see his father in person for as long as he can remember after his father was deported 10 years ago.

Stephen Hernandez, 9, in a strong voice said his dad had been deported and "I want Congress to stop separating my family," punctuated with a raised fist.

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Gabrielli said it's time for Congress to "hear the cries of the children and act now."

The scriptural call to "welcome the stranger does not mean to divide families," he said. "God is calling us to hear the cries of the children."

Rep. Luis Gutierrez of Illinois said at the rally that "we must be consistent and persistent" in asking for immigration reform that helps get the estimated 11 million people in the country illegally a chance to come legalize their status and eventually seek citizenship.

Gutierrez said he and those who were willing to be arrested were doing so to bring attention to the issue to one man, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, to pressure him to put a comprehensive reform bill to a vote in the House. The Senate passed such a bill in June, but Boehner has resisted calls to bring it to a vote. An effort by a bipartisan group of House members to draft a bill for that body fell apart and a comprehensive bill similar to the Senate version was introduced by a group of House Democrats last week.

"We will go and risk arrest and sacrifice the very freedom that 30,000 people in detention right now do not have," Gutierrez said. "We will go to jail for the thousands of you who cannot go back to your families."

Gutierrez said that for the first time in his 20 years in Congress, he knows the votes are there to pass a

comprehensive bill, including at least 30 or 40 Republicans, perhaps as many as 85.

A handful of House Republicans were on the stage at various points during the afternoonlong rally, as well as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who said she also was confident there were the votes to pass a comprehensive bill in the House.

Like other such rallies over the years, speakers included a variety of activists from multiple faiths, labor unions, business organizations and civil rights organizations, in addition to politicians.

The popular Grammy-winning Mexican-American band, Los Tigres del Norte, performed throughout the afternoon, providing a blend of "norteno" ballads, some of which described the struggles of migrants.

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