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## CMSM director reflects on immigration rally arrest

by Brian Roewe

Immigration and the Church

The night spent in jail gave Eli McCarthy time to reflect.

The director of justice and peace for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, McCarthy was among the more than 200 people arrested Oct. 8 outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington following an immigration rally on the National Mall.

The group included eight members of the House of Representatives -- among them John Lewis (D-Ga.), Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), and Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) -- as well as at least eight religious leaders, including Fr. Clete Kiley, a Chicago-based Catholic priest and director for immigration policy with the UNITE HERE international union.

In an Oct. 23 reflection on the experience, McCarthy said he did not come to the decision lightly to participate in civil disobedience, but rather after reflection on the examples of others who had adopted the method (Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Archbishop Oscar Romero), and on Martin Luther King Jr.'s outline of what constitutes a just law in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

"[King] explains that a just law squares with the moral law or the law of God and uplifts human personality (dignity), whereas an unjust law would fail these criteria.

"Dignity is uplifted when we treat each person as a gift, particularly as a gift from God out of love and for love. When we divide families, which are a key organ of love, ignore the gifts that immigrants are to our society, and become possessive about our land and resources then we are not acting in accord with human dignity," McCarthy said.

After participating in the 40 days of fasting, prayer and advocacy organized by the Interfaith Immigration

Coalition and seeing a rise in immigration-related civil disobedience arrests in the previous months, he felt the time was right to join the fray.

“There was need to bring attention back to the immigration issue, to signify the urgency as the political window appears to be fading, and to embody the de-humanization of the present system,” he said.

Still, there existed some reluctance to participate. McCarthy worried about the temptation of pride and self-ambition that can grow from engaging in civil disobedience, and wondered if he “a white, financially secure male” represented the right person to publicly risk arrest. He determined the “dehumanization in the system” impacts not just immigrants in the country illegally, but also those who enact and maintain such policies.

“By entering into the social suffering at some level, I am helping to illuminate this reality of de-humanization and unjust laws,” he said.

From his time in the police vans until his release the next morning, McCarthy discovered a personal transformation developing, as he became more aware of his own sins and more oriented with God’s care for the poor and marginalized. He hoped the acts of those arrested might encourage others to engage the immigration issue on some level.

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“However the seeds of encounter play out, as the personal and social relationships are fertilized, the flowers of political change become increasingly likely to bloom sooner or later,” he said.

Read the full reflection.

**Editor’s Note:** *This post has updated the arrested persons figure from more than 150 to more than 200.*

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