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Lenten Fast for Families draws attention to immigration reform efforts

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Mar. 6, 2014
Immigration and the Church

The traditional Lenten practice of fasting is being paired this year with the latest round of an ongoing campaign called Fast for Families, intended to bring attention to the campaign for immigration reform.

On Ash Wednesday, March 5, more than two dozen presidents of Catholic colleges and universities pledged to fast for 24 hours in support of the effort.

Their effort is one piece of the latest iteration of Fast for Families, which also includes weekly commitments to fasting, local ongoing fasts and cross-country stops at in-state congressional offices by national leaders of the campaign that last fall was based in a tent on the National Mall.

In a letter announcing their fast, the college presidents said their 24-hour act of solidarity and prayer "for those who still suffer because of cruel and impractical immigration policies" was a symbolic way of opening the season of Lent by remembering "Christ's journey of suffering in the desert wilderness" by praying for immigrants who hunger and thirst for justice.

The presidents said they "draw encouragement from students on our campuses who work tirelessly to turn this vision into a reality. Brave DREAMers are inspiring their peers to join them in the struggle for justice and dignity. Catholic students are praying and mobilizing and calling on Congress to act."

The presidents invited students, faculty and fellow administrators to join them in "this communal act of prayer. Pope Francis' powerful witness to the dignity of migrants and call for everyone to confront our 'culture of indifference' inspires us to act."

They noted that many of them wrote to Catholic members of Congress last summer urging them to use their positions of influence to "put the common good and families before partisan politics. As our political leaders delay, immigrant families are torn apart. More migrants die in the desert. We pray that by joining others across the country in this small act of sacrifice, the hearts of elected officials will be touched and leaders will be moved to act."

Meanwhile, the national leaders of the Fast for Families continued making stops on two cross-country routes to events held at the district offices of members of Congress. Typical was the stop in Phoenix by Eliseo Medina of the Service Employees International Union, who fasted last fall for 22 days in the tent on the National Mall, before ending his fast in November during an ecumenical prayer service.

In Phoenix, after events at offices of the Arizona congressional delegation, he sat with people who had been fasting for weeks in hopes of helping their relatives who are in immigration detention, facing deportation.

Medina's bus and another bus making a similar path across the northern part of the country are to converge in Washington for an event April 9. The paths are scheduled to take them to stops in 70 congressional districts.

An event sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will bring several bishops to the Mexican border at Nogales, Ariz., at the end of March. There, they will tour the border area and visit some of the church-supported programs to aid migrants. They'll celebrate a Mass on the border April 1, said a USCCB press release.

Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio L. Elizondo of Seattle, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration, said the point of the trip is to help highlight that immigration "is primarily about human beings, not economic or social issues."

He said those who have died or who are deported daily have the same value and God-given dignity as all people, "yet we ignore their suffering and their deaths."

Last summer on his first trip outside of Rome as pope, Pope Francis visited the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa to highlight the plight of African migrants who die while attempting to reach Europe.

"The U.S.-Mexico border is our Lampedusa," Elizondo's statement said. "Migrants in this hemisphere try to reach it, but often die in the attempt."

Fast for Families is encouraging others across the country to join them in fasting on Wednesdays during the current campaign.

The Senate last summer passed a version of immigration reform that includes many of the components supported by advocates for such legislation, including the USCCB and other faith-based organizations. Similar legislation in the House has not budged in the process. Advocates are hoping to persuade House leaders to bring a broad-ranging bill to a vote early this year, before this fall's elections.

Those signing the university presidents' letter included: Jesuit Fr. Michael J. Garanzini, Loyola University Chicago; Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova University in Pennsylvania; Mary Lyons, University of San Diego; Thomas Keefe, University of Dallas; Jesuit Fr. Kevin Wildes, Loyola University New Orleans; Vincentian Fr. Dennis H. Holtschneider, DePaul University, Chicago; Antoine M. Garibaldi, University of Detroit Mercy; Donna M. Carroll, Dominican University in Illinois; Jesuit Fr. Stephen Privett, University of San Francisco; LaSallian Christian Brother Michael J. McGinniss, La Salle University, Philadelphia; Mercy Sr. Jane Gerety, Salve Regina University, Newport, R.I.; Julie Sullivan, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota; and Msgr. Franklyn M. Casale, St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, Fla.

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