

Franciscan Action Network (FAN) Conference on Immigration 2009

S. Sylvia Wehlisch

On September 9th and 10th I attended a conference on immigration reform along with our Covenant Member Mary Ellen Durbin and 75 Franciscan participants. The conference was held at the Fullerton Cenacle in Chicago and we gathered to listen, learn and to then take action to help bring about urgently needed immigration reform.

The event began with an evening meal and time to mingle with each other to get ourselves settled in for the next day's work. After dinner we participated in a prayer service that included a testimony by Rosalba. She told us her story that still has her frightened to go out of her home. One day in the recent past she was driving with her 16 year old son and was pulled over by the police in Des Plaines, IL. She had no driver's license. The police questioned her and then took her to a police station and later to a Detention Center in McHenry County for a 3 month stay. During this time she was not able to call her sons (she has 3 sons the oldest is 16). She was desperate to let them know where she was and to get some help. Somehow the Western Suburban Action Project was able to meet with Rosalba and she was released to their care. We were told that there are some 400 Detention Centers throughout the USA. These are horrible places to experience. Rosalba wanted to tell us her story hoping that others would be spared her trauma. Rosalba's family is one of thousands that are separated from each other. This is one of the key reasons to work to reform the immigration laws so family members can be reunited with their loved ones.

Thursday morning Bishop John Manz of Chicago shared personal stories of his life as he tries to be present to those who struggle to bring about change so they can live without the daily fear of being persecuted because of their color or accent. There have been many documented and undocumented people who have been deported or detained. Many more who are in the process of becoming legalized are also caught up in workplace sweeps and deported. Many undocumented people have worked for years in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. These men and women have paid taxes, have participated in caring for their children and are good neighbors. They often work difficult and dangerous jobs for minimum wage, or less, in order to feed their families.

Some facts: undocumented people pay taxes. They pay billions of dollars in sales, income, and property taxes each year. Seven billion dollars go into Social Security and Medicare taxes each year and most will never receive the benefit of these paid taxes. We in the US have benefited from their labors.

There were many surrounding issues related to this bill that were covered in our time together. Kevin and Sarah spoke to the social and legal needs of immigrants and indicated that we need to get the Federal Government to reform our Health Care System so everyone can be healthier. In doing so health care costs will be less for all of us.

Our Franciscan Brothers of the Sacred Heart Province gave a presentation about their advocacy work in several Latino communities in San Antonio, Chicago and other cities. It became evident that their Franciscan presence is how they wanted to respond to this call for solidarity. I was proud to mention that our Sister Mariette has been working with some of our employees at our Motherhouse in obtaining their GED and citizenship.

Our last session was a panel of lawyers who talked to us about the cruel treatment that has been heaped upon 365000 immigrants who have been deported and about the many deaths that have occurred in this process. The bottom line is we need to be humane and bring about comprehensive immigration reform now. This reform needs to insure that families are not separated and that those here legally or in the process of becoming citizens are not rounded up merely because they have dark skin and speak with an accent. Reform also needs to ensure that human rights are respected throughout the process. Our friends and neighbors deserve our support.

May we Wheaton Franciscans open our hearts and minds and look to the spirit of St. Francis to act in solidarity for the immigrant in our midst. May we pray and work for new laws that protect immigrants and their families.