

I have been going to McHenry County Jail as a member of the Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants for the past year. On the last Tuesday of every month, I join a team of lay men and women, ordained ministers and members of religious communities to provide pastoral counseling for undocumented people who are awaiting deportation.

During each visit we are led into a small room where we stand and wait for the detained immigrants to arrive. We meet with several groups of men and women, all who walk into the room wearing bright orange jump suits. Some look scared; others, who have been there longer, smile when their eyes meet ours. We are able to greet each person individually, taking each one of their hands to let them know that we recognize that they are more than a prison number.

We are only granted fifteen to twenty minutes with each group of detained immigrants with whom we meet. During this time we are able to speak one on one or in small groups depending on the number of people who are in the room. We encounter men and women from across the world, speaking a variety of different dialects; however, the majority of detainees are from Latin America.

I have witnessed so much pain as men and women share with me the turmoil and fear they hold as they face their next transition. It has been during this sacred time that I have really begun to understand what it means to engage in a ministry of presence. I have begun to understand that it is not always what I say that matters, but how I am able to be present to each person, recognizing her/his dignity and the light that each one carries with them in God's eyes.

I have sat across from a youth who was two months shy of graduating from high school – only to be deported to Mexico where he has no family and does not know anyone. He has lived in the United States since he was two years old. I have sat with mothers who long to hold their children, fathers whose faces seem to light up when they describe their families. They weep as they know that they may never see their family members again. They all ask me to pray for them and hold them in my heart. I recognize that to be able to sit across from these men and women and to hold their hands is a privilege that their own family members do not even have. Family members of the detained have to visit over a television screen; face to face contact is prohibited. Towards the end of each session, we pray together – in Spanish and English – and ask God to be a presence in their lives – to protect and guide them on the next stage of their journey.

In my efforts to change our broken immigration system, I am called to walk with my immigrant brothers and sisters in their time of need. It is a call for which I am most grateful.

If you are interested in providing pastoral counseling at McHenry County Jail, please feel to contact either me (312) 641-5151 or Br. Michael Gosch (847) 637-2146.

Erin Cox