

Ministering to Detained Immigrants

By Father Ignatius DeGroot

When I arrived here in Chuichu, Arizona, to work with the O’odham people, I quickly found that there was not much pastoral work during the week. So I offered to travel to Eloy, about twenty-five minutes from where I live, and celebrate Mass in the prisons there. The first prison that I was asked to go to was the Eloy Detention Center, operated by the Corrections Corporation of America for the Federal Immigration Agency, I.C.E. I want to share with you some thoughts and some strong feelings about my experience.

There are different elements in the detention center. First of all, it is a collection center for immigrants who are caught crossing the border anywhere in this area of the country. Mexican immigrants are usually quickly transported back across the border. But immigrants from other countries are detained here until there is a sufficient number to fill a plane and take them back to their countries. A second group is comprised of those who were detained because they do not have legal residency, but who challenge their deportation for one reason or another. One man I spoke with had applied for residency after he married a citizen more than four years ago. The delay for these applications is now more than four years. There are others who make



Eloy Detention Center

the plea that their children were born here or that they need asylum from violence in their home countries. Today I spoke to a man who had fled the violence in El Salvador during the civil war, but only recently was picked up. All these are detained here, often for more than a year, until there is a court hearing to decide their cases. The third group is made up of those who have been convicted of some crime, and are serving time here, after which they will be deported.

My heart bleeds for many of these people. Many speak English, and have been in the United States for years. Now, perhaps because they were stopped for a traffic ticket, they find themselves in prison. Their family life is destroyed; they have lost their jobs or their small businesses; their dreams are gone. After Mass, many come to ask for a personal blessing. To look in their eyes, to see the sadness, to notice the tears that they try to hide, touches me deeply.



Detainee escorted by ICE agent

The other side of this, of course, is anger at what is being done to them. To treat someone as a criminal because he tries to provide for his family is unjust, harsh, cruel. To put persons in a prison, often for years, simply because our government bureaucracy is so inefficient, is punishing the innocent for our faults. I am sure that there are others who did commit crimes, and should be held accountable for them. But that would lead to a much wider topic—our whole penal system.

My time in Guatemala has given me another perspective on the whole question of immigration. The actions of the United States in that country are a major cause of this immigration. Since the 1870s and the beginning of the United Fruit Company, the United States has exploited Central America and has been a major cause for poverty there. We backed the army in Guatemala's recent civil



106 immigration violators being returned to Southeast Asia by ICE in August, 2008

war. The war was fought by the native Mayan people to reclaim their land. With our help, they were defeated, and now the army and its supporters own some forty percent of the country. They keep a lot of that land fallow. Coercing Central American countries to accept the North

American Free Trade Agreement has been another U.S. action that has brought great poverty. There is no way the small, poor farmers of these countries can compete with our subsidized grain growers and huge feed lots. Many of the young people in the Guatemalan interior see little future for themselves and that is why they try to immigrate.

Being in Guatemala also has made me deeply aware of another human cost of our immigration policies. There are many who die in the Arizona desert, or are robbed in Mexico, or who fall into the hands of extortionists, causing huge suffering for them and for their parents and family back home. Even the ones who make it and get established here often seem lost to their parents because they cannot return to visit them.

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Being here on the reservation gives me another perspective as well. I was talking to one of the O'odham about the border patrol which can be seen everywhere here. With a little smirk he said to me, "You know that all you Americans are illegals." Few U.S. citizens see that.

Our faith also gives us a different perspective on immigration. If we

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believe that God created the world so that it could provide a living for all his human children, then God gives people who cannot

make a living in one place the right to immigrate to another where they can. Human law has the real authority which comes from God only if it is made according to the laws of God. And so, perhaps, our assertion that immigrants have no right to come here, is sinful before God. Perhaps this is a law which has no real authority. Of course this does not mean that the government does not have both an obligation and the authority to regulate the process of immigration.

Yet there is another very positive side to my ministry. I feel immensely appreciated by the men and women at Eloy. The celebration of Mass for them is a consolation and source of hope. My ministry brings something normal and good into the midst of a depressing prison. I know that the people imprisoned at Eloy appreciate my being here because they kid me and always thank me. It is really a privilege and a blessing for me to celebrate with them. They give me more than I give them. They give me an opportunity to care, and to share life.

I hope and pray, for this country's sake and for the sake of these people that our next administration can do something good and just in this area.

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