



Matthew 25

*...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine,
you did for me.*

The Social Ministry Commission Newsletter
of St. Mary's Catholic Center, College Station, Texas

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Don Hutto, America's Family Prison

T. Don Hutto Family Residential Facility by Anna Zamarripa, Texas A&M student from St. Mary's

In our busy lives of rush and go, it is often easy to get lost in our daily activities. Realities and occurrences of the rest of the world get set aside on the top shelf and soon forgotten. Such is the case with the T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor, Texas. The center is a family detention center - that alone brings chills to the spine. In 2006 it was converted to house illegal immigrants awaiting their court day, as well as those awaiting asylum. Asylum is what citizens from other countries can ask for when they feel they are unsafe in their own country. The procedure can take time and until then they cannot begin their lives.

At first, detainees were to be housed only for one or two weeks, and it was assumed this was only for adults, but those expectations were soon proven wrong. Shortly after the center opened, it became known that some detainees spent up to five months and entire families were being detained in the facility. Illegal immigrants (non-criminal), who were caught or discovered, were held back rather than being sent home right away, even if they wished to go home. In the past, they were allowed to continue with their everyday lives as long as they reported to their court hearing. They would be put under close surveillance and have to meet regularly with officials. This method was easier on the children of the families. Sometimes part of the family would be sent home, while the other part would be detained. Center officials argue that keeping the family together at the center is best for the family. Perhaps this would be true if detainees only spent one month in the center, or if the center had a family-friendly environment, but as time passed, that ideal vision quickly faded away.

Let us paint a picture of the housing environment at the time. Don Hutto Residential Center was originally a prison, so it still resembled one; cells, bars, exposed toilets. The facility was surrounded by wire fences, and detainees had to undergo a count time. Mother and young girls lived separately from fathers and young boys. Older children lived separately from both of their parents. They were not allowed in each others rooms and could only see each other in "public" areas. The intimacy of family was non-existent. Parents felt unable to fulfill their jobs as caretakers. They were already in a difficult situation, and in such cases it is important for children to feel the support of their parents. Many children did not understand the situation that they were in. When it came to education,

resources were very limited. There was also a diversity of ethnicities and languages. Reports showed that children were not getting adequate education.

The practice in which the adult detainees were being interrogated gained public attention. They were asked to retell harsh stories of their past in the presence of their children. Some mothers even had to retell painful stories of rape. Parents were angered, felt helpless and exposed before their children. Even prisoners who are criminals are not interrogated in this manner. Rather than having those experienced with social work handle the detainees, those responsible for them had a history of working in correctional facilities. Those being detained are not criminals. In fact, there was a time when 50% of the detainees were children.

Families and children should not be detained in prison-like environment. It is inhumane and unnecessary. The center is run by a privately owned for profit company. The average cost of immigrant detention is \$95 per person per day. Alternatives exist such as monitoring by electronic ankle bracelets, by home visits or phone reporting, and cost as little as \$12-14 a

day. It said that over 90% of people monitored by those means report for their immigration court proceedings. Is it right to make a profit from the sufferings of others?

In 2007, the center was sued and a settlement agreement to improve conditions was reached. Positive changes have been made to the center. Education has improved and children are now allowed to take toys back to their cells. Interrogations are no longer executed before children, and better appropriate staff has been hired. Community, civil rights and religious groups, including Catholic Charities of Central Texas and Pax Christi, kept up pressure for an end to family detention there. It was announced this August that the center has stopped accepting new families and would be closed by the end of the year. As the change takes place, advocates are watching to see if conditions in the other family detention facility for illegal immigrants located Pennsylvania are improving, if cases are handled fairly and if new problems arise because of the shift.

As Catholics, we should be aware of situations like these, and do our part by telling others, praying, and even joining our efforts to those acting for changing these situations. If families are to be detained at all, they should be treated in the most humane manner. Follow the story, things are changing as you read this, and you never know where you can make a difference.



The Bishops Call for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (www.usccb.org)

The Hispanic Pew Forum estimates that at least twelve million undocumented immigrants live and work in the United States today. The motivations pushing immigrants to risk unauthorized entry into America are varied, but most come with the hope of reuniting with family members already here or to find work that will provide support for their family back home. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of persons in this country in an unauthorized capacity, living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to the undermining of immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart, migrant workers exploited by human smugglers and unscrupulous employers, and human lives ending in horrible deaths in the American desert. Immigration is not simply an economic or social issue, but ultimately a humanitarian issue which impacts human dignity and human life. The U. S. Catholic Bishops have been in the forefront of calling for comprehensive reform for several years now, which includes:

- A broad based legalization (permanent residency) of the undocumented of all nationalities;
- Reform of our family-based immigration system to allow family members to reunite with loved ones in the United States;
- Reform of the employment-based immigration system to provide legal pathways for migrants to come and work in a safe, humane, and orderly manner;
- Abandonment of the border "blockade" enforcement strategy;
- Restoration of due process protections for immigrants.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.
("Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope", U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2003)

What Can You Do?

Pray for the immigrants, especially those in detention centers. Pray for peace on September 21, the UN International Day of Peace when individuals, communities, nations and governments highlight efforts to end conflict and promote peace. Millions of people around the world participate in all kinds of events. Visit www.pathwaystopeace.org/ for more info.

Learn about the Catholic Social Teaching and social justice issues (www.usccb.org); in particular concerning immigrants, read the 2003 pastoral letter of the U. S. and Mexican bishops on immigration "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope" (www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml).

Educate people in your parish or community about what you have learned.

Advocate for a comprehensive and just immigration reform. See how you can get involved by visiting www.justiceforimmigrants.org/, the website of the Catholic Campaign for Immigration supported by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, or www.paxchristiusa.org/, the website of the Catholic peace and justice organization Pax Christi.

A fair and effective solution will come from a comprehensive approach that embraces all policy components: the rights of the state and of the receiving community, of the migrants, and of the international common good.
(Holy See on Migrant Workers, "A Comprehensive Perspective Is Needed", 2007)

Myths about Immigrants (www.justiceforimmigrants.org)

- Immigrants don't want to learn English: While first generation, non-English speaking immigrants predictably have lower rates of English proficiency than native speakers, 91% of second generation immigrants are fluent or near fluent English speakers.
- Immigrants Don't Pay Taxes: Between 50-75% of undocumented immigrants pay federal, state and local taxes. They also contribute to Medicare and provide as much as 7 billion dollars a year to the Social Security Fund. Further still, they pay sales taxes where applicable and property taxes.
- Immigrants Increase the Crime rate: Recent research has shown that immigrant communities do not increase the crime rate and that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native born Americans.
- Immigrants Take Jobs Away from Americans: The Urban Institute reports that between 2000 and 2005 the total number of low wage workers declined by approximately 1.8 million while the number of unskilled immigrant workers increased by 620,000, thus offsetting the total decline by about a third.
- Immigrants are a drain on the United States Economy: The immigrant community is not a drain on the U.S. economy but, in fact, proves to be a net benefit as revealed by research reporting that the average immigrant pays a net 80,000 dollars more in taxes than they collect in government services.
- Undocumented immigrants are a Burden on the Healthcare System: Federal, state and local governments spend approximately 1.1 billion dollars annually on healthcare costs for undocumented immigrants, compared to 88 billion dollars spent on all health care for non-elderly adults in the U.S. in 2000. Foreign born individuals tend to use fewer health care services because they are relatively healthier than their native born counterparts.
- The Catholic Church Supports Illegal Immigration and 'Open Borders': The U. S. Bishops recognize the validity of and need for effective border enforcement that protects Americans from criminal and terrorist elements, allows for orderly and legal immigration, and respects the sovereign rule of law of the United States.

Interested in learning more about the Catholic Social Teaching and how this applies to your everyday life? Join the Social Justice Bible Study group or the Social Ministry Commission. Contact Gerry Hince at hince57@msn.com.