Religious Leaders’ Offer Civil Disobedience to Expose Unjust Immigration Laws

On October 8th, a coalition of 210 people risked arrest for the sake of exposing the injustice of our immigration laws. This group included 8 U.S. congresspersons, many union leaders, and at least 8 religious leaders. Along with a Catholic priest, I was one of the Catholic actors who participated in this civil disobedience. In my role as Director of Justice and Peace for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, I have also been engaged with the Interfaith Immigration Coalition and with the Justice for Immigrants Campaign.

Civil disobedience is not a light decision or a common practice. However, it has been drawn on by many of the most inspirational and transformative leaders of human history—Socrates, Thoreau, Gandhi, Ghaffar Khan, Dorothy Day, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Cesar Chavez, Archbishop Oscar Romero, etc. As a Christian, we also point to Jesus, many of the early apostles and countless martyrs in the early Church and beyond, who entered into the practice of religious and civil disobedience.

But, one might ask why this issue and at this time? Dr. and Rev. Martin Luther King reflected on a similar question asked by his fellow clergyman when he wrote his Letter from Birmingham Jail. He explains that a just law “squares with the moral law or the law of God” and “uplifts human personality” (dignity), whereas an unjust law would fail these criteria.

Dignity is uplifted when we treat each person as a gift, particularly as a gift from God out of love and for love. When we divide families, which are a key organ of love, ignore the gifts that immigrants are to our society, and become possessive about our land and resources then we are not acting in accord with human dignity. Laws that perpetuate these behaviors are not just. Laws that make people wait 10-20 years to enter the country are unjust, particularly when they are seeking basic needs or are separated from family. Deporting 400,000 people a year often directly breaks up families while cultivating fear and distrust in residents. Recently, one seven year old saw her mom’s electronic ankle bracelet, heard about her mom’s deportation process, and asked “why would the country I grew up in do this to my mom?” Further, trade policies are unjust when they contribute to poverty in sending countries and the subsequent desperate migration in search for jobs. For example, since the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed into law unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. have increased to 12 million today from 3.9 million in 1993. A system of laws that perpetuates nearly 400 migrants dying in the desert per year is unjust. When companies like Corrections Corporation of America and GEO profit off of these laws and undermine significant changes through their interactions with Congress, dignity is being obscured.

In this context, along with the shifting attention toward the government shutdown, I discerned this issue and this time was ripe for civil disobedience to bear fruit personally, socially, and politically. There was need to bring attention back to the immigration issue, to signify the urgency as the political window appears to be fading, and to embody the de-humanization of the present system. My discernment arose out of participating in the 40 days (Sept. 9- Oct. 18) of fasting, prayer, and advocacy with the Interfaith Immigration Coalition and over 10,000 people in 46 states across the nation. The activity also built on the increasing escalation of civil disobedience by a broader network of immigration organizers, which included 40 arrests in August, 100 in September, and now over 200 in October.
But one might also ask, is there any impact? Most immediately, the experience of being arrested transformed me personally. There is often the temptation of an unhealthy form of pride and ambition with civil disobedience. There was certainly a rush and excitement as our group of 200 marched toward the Capitol with thousands on either side of us chanting and marching in support. I tried to be humble and focused on those who were really suffering from our unjust laws. As I sat on the street waiting for the arrest with occasional group chants and looking into the crowd, I also wondered about whether my privileged status in our society as a financially secure white male made me the right person to risk arrest. Was it just relatively easy for me to do and move on with my comforts? Yes, but I also sensed that the de-humanization in the system impacts not just those being excluded and deported, but also those who enact such laws and those who maintain our privilege by such laws. I am both complicit and to some extent de-humanized by this complicity. By entering into the social suffering at some level, I am helping to illuminate this reality of de-humanization and unjust laws. As I went into the police vans and waited through the night at the police station, I also became more aware of my own sinful thoughts. By orienting myself more fully with God’s attention to and care for the poor and marginalized, coupled with embodying disobedience to a higher civil authority then I normally do, my capacity to see my own sin and God’s grace grew. Thus, in the time I had for reflection as well as conversation with others who shared in the action, my personal transformation developed.

As my person is transformed, my relationships are affected. With this social impact there is also the less noticeable but likely impact on those watching the civil disobedience, those who get arrested with you, and perhaps even some officers, not to mention those who may read this story. I vividly recall looking into the eyes of young children watching us get arrested, wondering what they might be thinking---maybe “why am I here, this is boring,” or perhaps “how do I grow in courage to do things like this one day?” However the seeds of encounter play out, as the personal and social relationships are fertilized, the flowers of political change become increasingly likely to bloom sooner or later. May humility, hospitality, and courage blossom in each of us...

Eli S. McCarthy, PhD
Director of Justice and Peace
Conference of Major Superiors of Men