ICE Must Respect Places of Worship and Ministry

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials apprehended six men exiting a hypothermia shelter on February 8 at Rising Hope Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia -- violating ICE’s own policy not to conduct enforcement actions at or near “sensitive locations” like houses of worship. We, who are called to be Catholic religious leaders, are deeply troubled by the pattern of deportations of those seeking refuge who do not pose a “significant threat to national security and public safety.” We are outraged when a government agency breaks its commitment to religious respect and invades and violates holy ground. No action of a government should ever bring fear into any person who seeks worship or aid at a religious house of worship or religious sponsored place. Our constitution guarantees our freedom of worship and religion even when it embraces acts of mercy.

As Christians, we turn to the example of Jesus who often had a compassionate and merciful justice humanity could not imagine. The very soul of our country is based on being free from religious oppression. Are we so blind as to not see how many frightening moments in our world’s history began by the erosion of a universal belief in dignity for all and oppression of religion? We choose to remind all people of our long standing Catholic social teaching on the poor and Pope Francis renewed call to all humankind to encounter the other, build bridges with relationships, and resist injustice.

CMSM President Fr. Brian Terry, SA says, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ The very words of Jesus’ parable ring in my ears. I cannot imagine the pain filled eyes of the six vulnerable men who joyfully escaped the death of a cold night because of the care of a loving Church, only to be imprisoned as they exited… by the cold steel of handcuffs, a freezing cold steel of terror and despair which would go right into your soul.”

Immigration and Customs Enforcement is implementing President Trump’s recent executive orders to increase immigration enforcement by targeting all undocumented immigrants, including a Methodist lay leader in Kansas, a mother in Arizona, and now, men coming out of a church ministry that provides shelter in extremely cold conditions. People are increasingly afraid to go to school, hospitals, and places of worship. We promote the value of law and order, but we also recognize the greater values of merciful justice and compassion.

We invite others to join us in denouncing these deportation efforts that harm the “least of our brothers and sisters.” We especially denounce the irreverence, disrespect and violation of sensitive locations, such as houses of worship and ministry which belong to God and the erosion of our Constitutional right to be free from religious oppression by our government.
We commit to speaking out and finding creative ways to do all that we can to prevent these acts. We applaud all the individuals and the more than 800 congregations that have pledged support for the Sanctuary Movement. We especially call on all Catholics involved in the system of deportation and violation of sensitive locations to look deeply and prayerfully into their consciences and reflect on your moral responsibility in these circumstances.

We encourage all people to use this action alert to call ICE, Congress, and the White House and tell them to stop the raids and respect places of worship and ministry.

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The Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) supports and offers resources for U.S. leaders of Catholic men's religious institutes. CMSM promotes dialogue and collaboration on issues of religious life as well as peace and justice issues with major groups in church and society. There are more than 17,000 religious priests and brothers in the United States.