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Media contact: Kathy Dempsey

202-359-4379; kathydempsey8@gmail.com

Catholic Leaders Call to Free the Families and End Family Detention

WASHINGTON, DC—One year ago this month, a group of Catholic national advocacy organizations launched a campaign to end child detention in U.S. immigration facilities with a large public witness directed at U.S. policy makers in Washington, D.C. More than 70 Catholic leaders joined in prayer and nonviolent civil disobedience at the U.S. Capitol on July 18, 2019, in an effort to put pressure on Congress and the Trump Administration to end the immoral and inhumane practice of detaining immigrant children. Other actions of public witness and civil disobedience followed in Newark, New Jersey, and on the border in El Paso, Texas.

Now, in response to the ruling by a federal judge that all children currently held in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody for more than 20 days must be released by July 17, the organizers of the Catholic Campaign to End Immigrant Child Detention, offer a [joint statement](#) as well as the following individual responses.

Carol Zinn, SSJ, Executive Director, Leadership Conference of Women Religious

“It was just a year ago that Catholic women religious, priests, and lay leaders gathered first in Washington, then in Newark, and finally in El Paso to demand that the Trump administration stop separating children from their parents. Now, in the face of COVID-19, it appears they are attempting to repeat that abhorrent practice.

“We say again, loudly and clearly family separation is wrong. Imprisoning children is wrong. Demanding that immigrant parents give up their children or risk exposing them to the deadly coronavirus is wrong. The imprisonment of families and the use of family separation and deportation to punish those seeking safety and asylum in our country is wrong. These practices violate the principles of our nation and the tenets of our faith. We insist that the Trump administration follow the law and do what is right. The families imprisoned in Dilley, Karnes and Berks must be released now.”

Lawrence E. Couch, Director, National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

“The U.S. Government Accountability Office recently reported that the government has no clear accounting of the children who were separated from their families. The National Advocacy Center calls for the government to immediately respect Judge Gee’s ruling and release all detained children together with their families. Borders are man-made; a person’s human dignity is God-given.”

The Provincial Team of the Society of the Sacred Heart, United States and Canada Province

“The Society of the Sacred Heart condemns the detention of migrant families who are doing nothing more than seeking a better life for themselves and their children. We fear for the health and safety of families detained during a global pandemic, and we call on ICE to release them immediately.”

Sr. Simone Campbell, SSS, Executive Director, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

"We cannot turn away from the tragedy, isolation, and discrimination lived by immigrant children and families in cages across our nation. Medical care in detention facilities is woefully inadequate for any illness, to say nothing of COVID-19. These jails cannot keep them safe. Six children and dozens of adults have died in U.S. immigration custody, and yet ICE continues to detain children and families with confirmed COVID-19 cases. Faith demands an end to children in cages. Families need to be together. We demand that ICE follow the court order and release all children in their custody. Morality demands that ICE also release their parents with them!"

Scott Wright, Director, Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach

“As missionaries dedicated to serving migrants on both sides of the US – Mexico border, Columbans strongly denounce the cruel and unjust treatment of families who are fleeing from hunger and violence in their home countries to seek asylum in the United States. Migrant children and their families should be welcomed, not treated as criminals and detained or separated. To welcome migrants and refugees is intrinsic to who we are as Catholics and people of faith. We strongly oppose the anti-immigrant policies of the current administration.”

Susan Gunn, Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

“Now is the time to raise our voices. No to more family separation. We see what the U.S. government is poised to do to families hidden away in immigration detention centers, where the coronavirus is so prevalent that three members of Congress couldn’t be protected from exposure during a brief visit at a detention center last week. For safety, we need to get children out of detention immediately, but we will not let the government use the coronavirus as cover for separating families. Families belong together. We call on our government to release the children along with their parents and to use the affordable, reliable, community-based alternatives to detention that we know are readily available. To criminalize those who come seeking asylum, to escalate their trauma in terms of detention and confinement, and to routinely separate children from their parents is extreme, inhumane, and contrary to our core Christian values to welcome the stranger and safeguard the sanctity of the family.”

Stephen Schneck, Executive Director, Franciscan Action Network

“The immorality of the separation of immigrant children from their families is an affront to the heavens. Where is our country’s compassion? Where is our decency? Children and parents are becoming ill and dying in these unhealthy detention centers. They lack critically needed medical care in the midst of COVID-19. Franciscan Action Network demands that the administration obey the court order to release all children held in detention now! We also call on ICE to free the

families of these children. Family separation is cruel, immoral, and against our beliefs as Franciscan Christians.”

Rev. Michael K. Barth, S.T., General Custodian, Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity / Trinity Missions; Chair of the Justice and Peace Committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men

“Members of many of the men's religious institutes that belong to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men work alongside and accompany people on the move through our parishes and apostolic works, our ministries and missions. This includes asylum seekers such as those being held in the family detention centers in Pennsylvania and Texas. We call for release of these children and parents. Parents must not be asked to choose between the release of their child from a physically and emotionally harmful setting and their ability to be united with their children.”

Sister Patricia McDermott, RSM, President, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

“The abject cruelty with which Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been tormenting the lives of immigrant families and children in detention centers must end now. In Judge Dolly Gee’s ruling to release the children, she described the COVID-19 situation inside of detention centers as ‘on fire,’ and it is imperative that no one be made to suffer in these demoralizing and dangerous conditions.

We the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas urge the Trump Administration to immediately release families together and not revert back to its inhumane policy of “family separation.” Not one child should be taken from their parents and these family detention centers must be closed, permanently.

We are at a point of national crisis which requires each of us to rise to the moment with compassion, humanity and heart. We cannot allow families to be separated any longer and we unequivocally say families belong together.”