

# Baltimore Archdiocese, Catholic Charities offer reassurance to immigrants

To a small but determined group of familial parishioners, from babes in arms to the elderly at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown, Archbishop William E. Lori offered words of support in Spanish to immigrants before their 12:30 p.m. Mass June 23.

"I stand with you here today in solidarity with the immigrant community in Baltimore and throughout this nation," Archbishop Lori said. "We stand here together as people of faith, and we commit the church in Baltimore to conversation, prayer and action, so that we can all work together to bring about just and lasting dignity for immigrants in Baltimore and across the United States of America."

Archbishop Lori's remarks initiated an afternoon of support and encouragement by the Archdiocese of Baltimore and BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), following the announcement last week by President Donald Trump of imminent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Baltimore and nine other cities across the country.

"The church is always in favor, first, of the defenseless, the neglected and the forgotten. That is my personal commitment to you, as your bishop here in the church in Baltimore," Archbishop Lori said.

The raids were delayed for two weeks by the president to give Congress time to "work out a solution," as he said on Twitter June 22, the same day the raids were to begin.

Hours before Archbishop Lori's remarks, about a dozen members of BUILD, including organizer Rachel Brooks, gathered outside the church and provided courage and support to approaching parishioners.

Brooks, like other members of BUILD, remained skeptical of Congress producing

a solution, and is preparing for raids and deportations to begin in Baltimore during the first weekend in July.

“We had a really ugly, terrible dry run of how to prepare for a raid,” Brooks said to her team on the steps of the church before Mass. “We think they are going to continue to happen in the future. That is why we are here.”

She was encouraged, however, by the strength of the members who attended Mass.

“One parishioner said to me, ‘This is my church. This is my community. God is here to protect me.’” Brooks recalled.

In his remarks to congregants, Archbishop Lori outlined four initiatives that the archdiocese is focused on. They include the pastoral care provided by parishes to their immigrant communities; advocacy efforts of the U.S. Conference of

Catholic Bishops regarding comprehensive immigration reform; the work offered by the Esperanza Center, a program of Catholic Charities of Baltimore, providing free services and legal advice to immigrants; and the creation and implementation of the Parish Identification Card for undocumented immigrants and other vulnerable people.

According to Brooks, 600 people have now gone through the Parish ID program since it was introduced last October at Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús and have active IDs.

“We expect to do another 400 or more by the end of this year,” Brooks said.

In remarks made after his comments to the parish, Archbishop Lori stressed his support of the immigrants today, as well as the work needed beyond the imminent threat of deportation.

“The church has to lend its voice to immigration reform, to integral immigration reform to help really fix this and to secure a long and lasting justice for our immigrants,” Archbishop Lori said. “We are solidly backed in all of this by Pope Francis, whose love for immigrants and refugees is absolutely rock solid and a model for us all.”

Redemptorist Father Bruce Lewandowski, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, described Highlandtown as a “ghost town” on Saturday.

“Usually, the streets are packed with people shopping, they are doing laundry at the laundromat, they are going to the grocery store,” he said. “Families go to the park. Parents take their children out. Yesterday, no one was on the street. Everybody’s lives were disrupted. I characterize it as an act of domestic terrorism.”

Father Lewandowski shared the story of an immigrant family that was waiting by the church steps early Sunday morning. When he asked if they were there for morning Mass, they said they had been there all night out of fear. They did not know where else to go.

“So when people are afraid, especially in this instance with ICE, they come to church,” said Father Lewandowski, who then turned to Archbishop Lori. “And so to say that you stand with them, it is extremely important. I applaud you for that.”

Following Mass, The Esperanza Center of Catholic Charities of Baltimore provided direct support to about 100 individuals in a “Know Your Rights” seminar, offering critical information about rights of immigrants, especially to those who may be facing deportation.

Giuliana Valencia-Banks, outreach coordinator at the Esperanza Center and a first-generation immigrant, reminded attendees of the seminar that they have rights guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution, regardless of their immigration status.

“We seek to empower them to exercise those rights without fear. These include the right to remain silent, the right to deny permission to a search of your person, vehicle or home, and the right to request a lawyer,” Valencia-Banks said. “We also talk about what they should do if ICE agents should arrive at their homes, the importance of consulting with an attorney and having an emergency plan in the event a family member is detained.”

“We need to stand together with our immigrant brothers and sisters and say not here in Baltimore,” said a determined Father Lewandowski. “And we’re going to defend our brothers. And when ICE is at the door, they got to get through me first.”

Brooks, in solidarity, echoed Father Lewandowski's determination to protect immigrants in Highlandtown and throughout Baltimore. "We're not going anywhere," Brooks said. "This fight is beginning, and we are not going anywhere."