

Detroit parishes lose hundreds to deportation

DETROIT - Father Anton Kcira first began to notice the absence of more and more of his regular parishioners at St. Paul (Albanian) Church in suburban Rochester Hills back in 2005, and the loss due to deportations has escalated since then.

"Last year we lost about 200 families, and Our Lady of Albanians lost 120," said Father Kcira, pastor of St. Paul's, of the situation in his parish and at the other Albanian ethnic parish in Beverly Hills, another Detroit suburb.

The deportations - and detentions pending deportation - have split hundreds of families, said Father Kcira, who conducted a March 16 outdoor Stations of the Cross and prayer service for the deportees, detainees and their families outside St. Paul Church. An estimated 1,000 people attended the service, and a similar service was held at Our Lady of Albanians Church.

St. Paul parishioner Scipe "Skippy" Vuljaj, a 33-year-old mother, spent 99 days in detention last year before finally being released to return to her home in suburban Sterling Heights.

Another parishioner, Marcela Djonovic, 31, a mother of three and pregnant, is worried about her husband, Djelosh, 44, held in custody since Feb. 1.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been rounding up ethnic Albanians who have lost their political asylum appeals, and Father Kcira and other leaders in the local Albanian community want a moratorium until Congress passes a new immigration bill - as is widely expected by this summer.

"Then, whatever the new process is, let them go through it," says Dede Beleshi, an activist in the Albanian community.

Greg Palmore, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, denied March 20 that Albanians are being disproportionately targeted, but said he needed more time to comment on individual cases.

Father Kcira and Beleshi questioned whether under current law some of those detained should have been held. For example, some were picked up even though they had been notified they would be allowed to reside in the U.S.

Vuljaj had a letter saying she would be granted residency, but it didn't make any difference to the eight federal officers who came to her home at 11:15 p.m. Aug. 22, 2006. "I showed the letter to them, and one of them said, 'We came for you, and you're going to come with us,'" she recalled.

"I paid taxes for 13 years, never took anything from the government, and never even had a speeding ticket," she said.

Her husband, Don, and eldest son, Patrick, 16, helped care for the younger children - Gjovana, 10, Elizabet, 7, and George, 3. She said George is still afraid every time he sees a police car, after being present when his mother was taken away.

Vuljaj said she doesn't know what she would have done without her Catholic faith: "I prayed to God every day, 'Please God, help me get through this.' It was so hard to be without the kids."

But she added that she found it comforting that Father Kcira was remembering her each week at Mass.

Vuljaj said she was in jail with as many as 18 other Albanian women in similar circumstances. "We would try to ease each other's worries, and tell each other, 'Don't cry,' but we would all cry," she said.

The problems being experienced by the Albanians stem from a complex confluence of circumstances, Beleshi explained.

Many came as refugees from political turmoil in Albania itself, or in portions of the former Yugoslavia - such as Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo - during the 1990s. When they arrived in the United States, they applied for political asylum and were granted authorization to work, but their asylum request was later denied. Beleshi said their cases are complicated because:

- The government didn't rule on their applications until seven or more years later,

because of a backlog. By then, the political conditions had changed in their home countries and officials denied they faced persecution or danger.

- In many cases their spouse is a U.S. citizen, as would be any of their children born here.

- Many have nothing to go home to. If from the former Yugoslavia instead of Albania itself - like most local Albanians - their home countries may have purged them from citizenship rolls in a form of nonlethal ethnic cleansing.