

Illegal immigrants find refuge in holy places Churches, citing 'broken law,' revive the ancient tradition of sanctuary

By Emily Bazar
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LONG BEACH, Calif. — Five immigration agents rapped on Liliana's front door one morning in May. "We've come for you," she recalls them saying.

Liliana, a 29-year-old factory worker from Mexico who crossed the border illegally in 1998, begged and pleaded. "What about my children?" she asked. "I have a baby. I'm nursing."

The agents softened when they heard Pablito crying, she says, and gave her a reprieve. They ordered her to report to a detention center five days later to be sent back to Mexico.

Instead, Liliana hid at the home of a Catholic deacon and his wife. Last month she emerged from hiding and took up residence at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, which has pledged to protect her from deportation.

St. Luke's and Liliana are central characters in the New Sanctuary Movement, a small but growing coalition of churches, synagogues and other houses of worship that is challenging the immigration system, despite legal risk, as the nation debates how to deal with the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the USA.

The congregations say the immigration system mistreats immigrants and breaks families apart. They want to end raids of job sites that have led to the arrest of thousands of undocumented workers, and they're lobbying for policies that would help keep the families of illegal immigrants together and in the USA.

Drawing on the tradition of sanctuary, in which churches declare themselves safe havens for those fleeing violence or prosecution, congregations from New York to San Diego have begun to view supporting illegal immigrants — and occasionally sheltering them from deportation — as a moral and religious duty.

"We don't accept a broken law that causes separation of families," says Richard Estrada, an associate pastor at Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in Los Angeles. "We will protect families, those in danger of being separated. ... We're doing what we think is the right, moral thing to do."

Congregations in about 50 cities have joined or expressed interest in the sanctuary movement, says Alexia Salvatierra, a Lutheran pastor and one of the national coordinators. Churches in Los Angeles, San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and New York are helping and housing immigrants, and congregations in Miami, Kansas City and Phoenix plan to start soon, she says.

Salvatierra and others acknowledge their protection is mostly symbolic because the government has the legal authority to send agents into a church and detain immigrants. But they're betting the government won't.

"It doesn't make good press for the government to go into churches," says Julia Wakelee-Lynch, associate rector at St. Luke's. "Many media outlets have called and said, 'Please call us the minute something happens.' "

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff agrees that immigration officials want to avoid "a media circus and a confrontation." Even so, his department must enforce immigration laws "whether people are happy or unhappy" with them.

"We reserve our options, and we take the action that we feel is appropriate," Chertoff says. "We don't give people assurance that they have a sanctuary, nor do we necessarily indicate when we're going to do something. They're on their own if they're going to defy the law."

The sanctuary movement is drawing criticism from groups such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which promotes limits on immigration. Dan Stein, president of the group, calls the family separation argument "ridiculous" and says the movement acts as if it's above the law.

"You leave your family behind when you make the decision to come (to the USA), and then you break the law to do it," he says. "If people come illegally, they're taking certain risks."

Jose, a 43-year-old undocumented immigrant from Mexico, moved into Our Lady Queen of Angels in May. Two of his four sons were born here and are citizens.

Jose first crossed the border illegally through Tijuana in 1989. He has been battling immigration officials since 2002, he says, when they discovered he worked at Los Angeles International Airport. Last year, they told him he had to leave the USA by November. He didn't.

Jose is appealing his case, Estrada says, but fears he'll be deported and his family split up. At the church, Jose's second-floor room opens to balcony pews. "I'm very close to God," he says in Spanish.

Hundreds of immigrants have sought help from the church movement recently, but congregations typically give sanctuary only to those who fit a profile. They seek immigrants facing deportation who have children, parents or other close relatives in the USA legally, to emphasize immigration laws' impact on families. Such immigrants must be willing to speak publicly to draw attention to the cause.

So far, eight immigrants across the nation are getting financial, legal and other help from the movement. Four of them, including Liliana and Jose, are staying in church buildings.

Most speak to reporters on the condition their last names not be publicized, for fear their families would be harassed.

Sanctuary can take various forms. Congregations supply lawyers or medical care, provide financial assistance or offer moral support at immigration hearings. Immigrants who seek shelter — not all want it, and not all congregations involved can provide it — never leave church grounds.

Church leaders usually make a three-month sanctuary pledge to the immigrants but acknowledge it may last much longer. The immigrants say they will remain cloistered until their legal cases are resolved or until Congress approves a plan to help lead to their legalization. Among those receiving help:

- Joe, 28, and his wife, Mei, 26, came to the USA from China using fake passports. He came in 1996; she in 2000. They applied for asylum but it was denied, Joe says.

Authorities discovered them in the country illegally in late 2005, when the Brooklyn residents were in a car pulled over for speeding. They now face deportation.

They have two children, 2-year-old Crystal and 4-month-old Jeffrey, who are U.S. citizens because they were born here. The couple fear they would be punished in China for violating the government's population-control policy that limits many families to one child.

Members of the three Lutheran churches in Brooklyn that have "adopted" Joe and Mei attend immigration hearings with them. The couple have declined physical sanctuary so far but say they may seek shelter if they lose their appeals.

- Marco Castillo, 25, came from Mexico with his mother and two sisters when he was 4 to join his father. They crossed into this country legally with a visitor's visa in 1986 but stayed after it expired.

They applied for legal residency and got bad legal advice, he says. Castillo, his mother and one sister — the other married a citizen — signed papers saying they would leave voluntarily without realizing what they were doing, he says. Their case is being appealed.

Castillo was senior class president at San Diego's Crawford High School, where he graduated in 2000. He worked his way through San Diego State University as a janitor, cashier, busboy and restaurant manager. Now a graphic designer in San Diego, he gets financial and moral support, but not shelter, from Quakers.

"It's spiritual sanctuary," he says.

- Juan, 38, came to the USA in 1992 to escape poverty in Guatemala. He says he paid a smuggler \$1,600 to sneak him into the USA through Nogales, Ariz.

He went from making \$1 a day cutting bananas in Guatemala to owning a landscaping business in Southern California with 40 customers. Juan sought legal residency but missed a meeting with immigration officials because he couldn't read a notification letter in English. He was ordered deported in 2004.

In May, Juan moved into a Lutheran church in North Hollywood, Calif., because he feared immigration agents would show up at his home.

His daughters, 1-year-old Michelle and 6-year-old Yanette, visit him each day. The children, who were born here, are citizens. Their mother, Juan's common-law wife, is in the country illegally.

Members of the congregation bring food and some fill in for him on his landscaping rounds, says Father Richard Zanotti of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, one of five churches helping Juan.

The tradition of sanctuary dates to the first centuries of Christianity, when churches were considered places of peace, says Daniel Maguire, professor of moral theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee. In 11th-century Europe, the "Truce of God" formalized the concept, he says, giving legal protection from the authorities to those who sought sanctuary in churches.

"If you could get yourself onto a church property ... you were safe," Maguire says.

Today, sanctuary offers no legal protection from the government, including immigration agents. "If they have a warrant for an individual's arrest, whether they are in a church or a shopping mall, they have a right to enter and enforce" it, says Carlina Tapia-Ruano, past president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Still, some churches feel a moral obligation to offer sanctuary during crises. In the 1980s, U.S. churches smuggled and hid Central American refugees they said faced persecution and death squads at home.

"This is what we are called to do by our Christian principles," says Reginald Swilley, a former associate pastor at Maranatha Christian Center in San Jose, Calif. His congregation soon may offer sanctuary, including shelter, to an immigrant.

It is illegal to harbor illegal immigrants or shield them from detection, says Charles Kuck, president-elect of the immigration lawyers group. Penalties include stiff fines and prison sentences. Providing shelter to an illegal immigrant could be interpreted as breaking that law, he says. "If I were going to advise a church, I would tell them not to do this."

But Peter Schey, the lawyer advising the sanctuary movement and president of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law in Los Angeles, says the churches are within the law. He advises congregations that they're not guilty of harboring if the immigrants aren't in hiding and have active cases pending to legalize their status.

Church leaders say that if U.S. agents arrived with a warrant to take an immigrant into custody, they would not block them. "That's what we call the worst-case scenario," Wakelee-Lynch says. "I don't anticipate we would resist."

Elvira Arellano, 32, became the first face of the emerging sanctuary movement when she moved into Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago with her son on Aug. 15, 2006, the day she was supposed to report for deportation.

Arellano never leaves church grounds, but 9-year-old Saul, who was born here and is a citizen, goes to school and other activities, says church pastor Walter Coleman.

"We fear God more than we fear Homeland Security," Coleman says.

The sanctuary movement isn't only for illegal immigrants. Jean Montrevil, 38, came here from Haiti in 1986 and is a legal resident.

But a 1989 drug conviction, which sent him to prison for 11 years, qualified Montrevil for deportation and landed him in detention for six months in 2005. He reports monthly to immigration officials. The Brooklyn resident is married to a U.S. citizen. The couple have four children.

Two Manhattan churches have written letters on Montrevil's behalf and sent members with him to immigration hearings. If his legal options fail, he says, he could leave his family or take them to Haiti, which he fears is unsafe because of poverty and political instability.

He's unlikely to choose either, he says. "The entire family probably will go into sanctuary," he says. "We really want to stay together as a family to face the consequences."

Across the country, 4-month-old Pablito naps at St. Luke's to the sound of Latina music star Marta Sánchez. The room that the church hastily converted from an office is filled with furniture donated by parishioners, including a bed, a refrigerator and a kitchen table.

Pablito is still nursing, so Liliana keeps him with her. She left Susi, 4, and Gerardo Jr., 7, at home in Oxnard, Calif., with her husband. They and their father, who are U.S. citizens, visit on weekends.

Her deportation order stems from 1998, when she was caught trying to get into the USA with a fake U.S. birth certificate. She says she didn't realize that would thwart her chances of becoming a legal resident. She later hired a smuggler to sneak her into Arizona.

When immigration agents ordered her to report for deportation in May, she says she couldn't do it.

"I understand it was a serious responsibility to appear, but my obligation to my kids was bigger," she says in Spanish. "I will stay in sanctuary as long as it's necessary."