

Personal Reflection: Witnessing at the Berks (PA) Detention Facility

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On July 17, 2020, I attended a [daylong event outside the Berks Detention Facility](#) in Leesport, PA, where five asylum-seeking families are being held. The stories of the detained are unique and yet also universal. They all left their homes under heart-wrenching circumstances to seek safety in the United States. Yet, instead of being allowed to live with relatives or a non-family sponsor while awaiting a series of asylum-related court dates after their credible fear interviews, they were assigned to a facility where [sexual assault by guards](#) and [limited medical care](#) have been documented again and again.

People of many different faith backgrounds and worldviews assembled on that very warm July day to serve as a public witness to the inhumane and unjust imprisonment. We convened to call attention to the ruling made by a federal judge that the already deplorable detention conditions were being exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. For ten hours, different groups took the lead in raising up the stories, experiences, and voices of current and past detainees. Music, chants, posters, speeches, banners, prayers, and projected images repeated the same refrain: *Free the families and free them together.*



It was my sense that the hundreds of people gathered throughout the day came for different reasons. Some, like the [Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees](#), came to represent a specific group of people currently affected by unjust immigration policies. (Presently, 75% of those detained at Berks are Haitian.)

Guadalupe Mendez, one of my former students and a recent college graduate pictured here with me, attended to support her younger sister who is involved in the [Juntos](#) youth leadership program.

Others, such as the team from [Tsuru for Solidarity](#), explained that they were speaking out, “On the moral authority of Japanese Americans who suffered the atrocities and legacy of U.S. concentration camps during WWII...” with a clarion call to stop repeating history. One of the young speakers from Tsuru referenced his upbringing in a Christian context and asked out loud to those assembled, “Where are the people of faith?”

While I think his question was somewhat rhetorical and the program later in the day did include a presentation by interfaith members of the [Shut Down Berks Coalition](#), I could hear in his voice a sense of urgency that one does not typically find at these kinds of rallies. I heard a deep longing for the kind of collective mobilization that draws on all people



of faith and good will, not from a place of anger, but from a place of collective care and shared humanity.

Given our masks and the essential social distancing required in a pandemic, it was difficult to have the kinds of authentic conversation that one would hope to have as the day shifted from one type of public action to the next. If I could have spoken quietly with someone like the gentleman from Tsuru, I would have said, "I am here as person of faith, I am here for families like [Mariam and Yohannes, friends of mine who were detained at Berks.](#)" I would have explained that as I stood amidst the stand of trees overlooking the brick facility and lines of police as a Catholic Christian representing the Conference of Major Superiors of Men whose members do believe the Catholic faith calls us to stand up for the marginalized.

Unfortunately, that Friday ended without the anticipated release of the families detained in Texas and Pennsylvania, despite the [court order](#). Subsequent legal wrangling puts the situation at an impasse. In a recent [interview with CNN](#), the director of Proyecto Dilley (a pro-bono legal services project supporting one of the detention centers in Texas) explained, "The bottom line for me is that kids are detained indefinitely and they have no way out unless ICE agrees to do it or families agree to be separated." Meanwhile, positive COVID-19 cases continue to be identified in ICE detention facilities.

Thank you to each person active locally and nationally who is working for the release of these children and parents. Thank you for your faithful witness and for the opportunity to represent CMSM in this way. I am confident that the detained mothers, fathers, and children, who joined our songs of liberty/*liberté*/*libertad* from behind the fence that day, are also grateful for your continued labor for their liberation.

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