

On eve of immigration hearing, religious leaders pray for justice

By Paul R. Leingang
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OWENSBORO, Ky. (CNS) -- "We do not pray in anger," said Ed Monahan at an ecumenical prayer service in Owensboro the night before a congressional hearing was held in Evansville, Ind., on immigration.

"We do not pray in despair," he added. "We pray in hope that all will be treated justly by our laws."

The Aug. 29 congressional hearing was one of 21 scheduled throughout the country. It was led by Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., who chairs the House Committee on the Judiciary. Reps. John Hostettler, R-Ind., and Steve King, R-Iowa, were present, as was Rep. John Conyers Jr., D-Mich., the ranking minority member in the House.

The hearing's topic was "The Reid-Kennedy Bill: The Effect on American Workers' Wages and Employment Opportunities." Four preselected witnesses gave prepared testimony. No one from the audience was permitted to speak.

Monahan, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, was one of the speakers at the Aug. 28 evening service at St. Stephen Cathedral in Owensboro. The theme of the service -- "Every Man and Woman Is the Image of God" -- was also the title of a joint pastoral letter of the Kentucky bishops issued Aug. 29.

Bishop John J. McRaith of Owensboro presided at the service. Bishop Gerald A. Gettelfinger of Evansville proclaimed the Gospel. Ministers from Baptist, Lutheran and United Church of Christ congregations participated in the service, speaking and praying in Spanish and English.

Among those who attended the service were Hispanic ministry leaders from the two Catholic dioceses, clergy and vowed religious, families from the area, and groups from South Bend, Ind., and Lexington.

Saying "faith without action is dead," Monahan told the prayer service, which drew about 200, that "our action this evening is significant."

That action was "our presence and our prayer," he said. "Only with prayer -- prayer that storms the heavens for justice and mercy, prayer that cleanses our hearts and our soul -- will we achieve the culture of human dignity."

In reference to the Judiciary Committee, he prayed that "those who make our laws know that every man and woman is the image of God."

Monahan encouraged prayer service participants to attend the hearing. Many did.

"We must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice," he said. "We have a responsibility to seek, through the conversion of heart and mind, enactment of just laws. Laws that recognize that every man and woman, documented or undocumented, is the image of God."

Another speaker, Kevin Appleby of the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, reflected on a text from Jeremiah. In the passage, God promises to remain in the land of the chosen people "if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm."

Appleby said, "We do not want the stranger to be oppressed in our land."

He further suggested that the view of the earth from space showed the divisions of land and water, but "no human boundaries." He said, "God made the earth without boundaries."

On Aug. 29, the date of the hearing, Kentucky's bishops asked people to see Christ in "the face of migrants" and to work toward a policy that "treats immigrants justly."

"We respect the right of nations to enforce their borders and to enforce reasonable immigration laws. At the same time, we regard every person, illegal immigrant, legal immigrant or citizen, with the mind of Christ: a human person worthy of dignity and respect," they said in an 11-page joint statement.

The statement called on Catholics and all Kentuckians "to welcome the beneficial aspects of migration, to overcome every form of discrimination, injustice and contempt for persons coming into our land" and to work for "just treatment" of immigrants in laws.

Saying the country's current immigration system is in "serious need of repair," the bishops called for the adoption of "responsible, comprehensive" immigration reform. As a "matter of justice," they said, it should include a broad-based earned legalization of undocumented persons, a temporary worker program with appropriate protections for both U.S. and foreign workers, changes to the family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times for family reunification, and "restoration of due process for immigrants."

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Contributing to this story was Joseph Duerr in Louisville.