Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word Srs. Jean Durel, Josetta Eveler, Michele O'Brien, Margaret Snyder and Martha Ann Kirk participated in a vigil and procession to South Texas Family Residential Center on Jan. 28, 2026, in Dilley, Texas. (Courtesy of Martha Ann Kirk)



by Sr. Martha A. Kirk

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Candy, a lovely 13-year-old girl, spoke of the trauma she feels when a dog comes near. When she was 3 years old, she and her mother were in a detention center and the guards had frightening dogs.

Ayaan Moledina, a 17-year-old student, and a Muslim, touched my heart as he said:

> We are raising a generation of children that are immune to all this hatred, who think it's okay to discriminate against their peers because they see leaders in power doing the same thing. But I know that if those people had to live in the shoes of someone like me for just one day, they would understand. The world looks at people like me and Liam Conejo Ramos differently because of the color of our skin and where we're from. My parents came to this country from Pakistan as teenagers to pursue the American dream, to build a better life, to get a quality education, and to create a strong foundation for their children. The foundation they built for my community is being torn down by the country they pledged their loyalty to.

An Indigenous leader spoke of land where his people lived for thousands of years and then said, "No one is illegal coming into this land which was stolen."

Candy, Ayaan and the Indigenous leader spoke to about 350 of us gathered in a park in Dilley, Texas, in late January. We were preparing to walk about two miles to the South Texas Family Residential Center, to draw attention to Liam Conejo Ramos, 5 years old, and his father, Adrian Alexander Conejo Arias, who had been detained the week before by ICE officials in Minnesota and transferred to Texas.

The center is one of the largest immigrant detention centers in the United States and has a capacity of 2,400. It was intended for women and children from Central America. While Minnesota is getting more attention in the news, the largest number of detained people are in Texas.

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word Srs. Jean Durel, Josetta Eveler, Michele O'Brien, Margaret Snyder and I were part of the Libertad vigil and procession. Sister Michele noted that we were people from many places, ages, nationalities and colors together. We were saying to the media that it is wrong that the U.S. government is holding and treating people in this manner. These women and children have committed no crime. They are seeking a better life. As one sign said, "Do you cage your children?" Most of us came to be seen by the children, to let them know they are not alone or forgotten. Sister Josetta, the eldest among us, said that she was very happy that she had the opportunity to participate and that she was physically able to do so.



Around 350 people gathered in a park in Dilley, Texas, on Jan. 28, 2026, for a vigil and procession to South Texas Family Residential Center. (Courtesy of Martha Ann Kirk)

The Texas Unitarian Universalist Justice Ministry, led by the Rev. Erin Walter, organized the vigil after discovering that Texas U.S. Reps. Joaquin Castro and

Jasmine Crockett were going to be visiting there. In only three days, this successful and touching gathering was put together. Many clergy and faith leaders, our Incarnate Word Sisters, Sisters of the Holy Spirit, and Daughters of Charity participated.

Gerald Poyo, a friend and university professor, who walked near me for a while, spoke of his experience:

> Already, an ominous feeling had enveloped us as we drove down Interstate Highway 35. Near our Dilley exit, a large dark green military vehicle without any windows passed us as if we were standing still at 70. "National Guard," I had thought as it approached from behind and I moved to the right lane, but instead on the vehicle's side read State Police DPS. It exited just before the Dilley exit and continued slowly on the access road. Still on the highway, we watched as we passed and wondered. We later realized the vehicle must have been transporting the state troopers who later arrived on the scene of the detention center demonstration intent on causing disruption at the already disbanding gathering.

The vigil and the U.S. representatives seemed to have grabbed the attention and sympathy of the U.S. people enough for the judiciary to act. Liam and his father were released from the detention center and returned to Minnesota. What about the thousands of other children in detention?

The Flores settlement from 1997 has been the legal agreement for protecting children in immigrant detention. It says that their basic needs should be met and that a child should not be held in custody for more than 20 days.

The Marshall Project of Immigration and Customs Enforcement found that the current administration's revival of family detention has taken thousands of children into custody. As of December 2025, at least 3,800 children under 18 years old have been taken since the U.S. president came into office for his second term. Over 1,000 children have been in detention over 20 days according to the Marshall Project's analysis. People who have valid legal claims to remain in the U.S. often get so discouraged in detention with few legal resources and bad living conditions that they leave our country.

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Sister Margaret was grateful that we drew attention to Liam and his father. "I hope our protest efforts had something to do with that decision. Joining the Libertad demonstration was a way for me to make a statement regarding my belief that immigrants are a gift to our country."

In 2018, I helped host a panel of health care professionals who spoke of how children are traumatized in detention. Sr. Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, spoke of their ministry to immigrants then. Recently the U.S. government has cut all federal funding to Catholic Charities Rio Grande Valley.

I have a new call as staff with the Charter for Compassion. Charter for Compassion calls us to live in solidarity with immigrants. On its website, it states:

> The principle of compassion, which has always resided at the heart of all religious, ethical, spiritual and indigenous traditions, now calls us to a profound transformation, from separation to kinship, from charity to justice, from competition to cooperation and from human-centered thinking to universal awareness. We recognize that authentic compassion begins with the understanding that inner healing extends outward through just relationships, regenerative systems, and reverent care for all life. Compassion is both a deep awareness of suffering and a courageous commitment to transformation, addressing symptoms and root causes through intentional action and structural change.

Many biblical ideas are reflected in the Charter for Compassion:

> Rooted in inner healing and manifested as justice, this expanded compassion can dissolve our perceived boundaries between self and other, human and nature, past, present and future. Born of our deep interdependence with all life, compassion is essential to human relationships and to the continuation of life itself on Earth. It is the path to collective healing and indispensable to the creation of regenerative economies, restorative justice and a thriving planetary community. We call upon all beings to join this great work of our time: the transformation of our civilizations from systems of domination to cultures of partnership, from economies of extraction to economies of care, from a patterned

> consciousness of separation to an expanded awareness of sacred kinship with all life.

Yes, we have sacred kinship with imprisoned immigrants whether in Dilley, Texas, or Minnesota. The Charter ends by stating: "May our words become actions, our actions become culture and our culture become the foundation for a world where all beings can thrive in dignity, beauty, and beloved community."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.