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Social Justice

Jennifer Vasquez Sura, middle, holds a sign calling for the liberation of her husband Kilmar Abrego Garcia, during a Holy Week vigil near the White House on April 14 in Washington. Catholics joined the interfaith gathering to pray for the liberation of Abrego and other immigrants sent to a prison in El Salvador. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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Dominican Sr. Carol Gilbert said there wasn't a better place this year than in front of the White House to illustrate Holy Week readings, which start with the injustice that visited an innocent man, one wrongfully imprisoned at the hands of the powerful. And she wasn't solely referring to Jesus in the Gospels.

Gilbert, a well-known stalwart against nuclear weapons and violence, joined other Catholics and members of various faiths for a Holy Week vigil April 14 in the park in front of the White House to support the wife and children of deported Maryland resident Kilmar Abrego Garcia with prayers, as the two men who could free her husband, but refuse to do so, were meeting yards away.

Abrego was not just deported to his native El Salvador in early March following an "administrative error" by the Trump administration, but he also ended up with other migrants in the notorious Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, prison there. NBC News, citing court filings, reported that Abrego had never been criminally charged in El Salvador or the U.S. "I think this case, Kilmar's case, is really important because this man has done nothing" to merit imprisonment, Gilbert told Global Sisters Report.

Gilbert, who has served time in prison for her nonviolent beliefs and actions, listened as pastors and other people of faith lamented modern-day injustices, including Abrego's, and talked about what Holy Week had to say about those unjustly imprisoned as Jesus was.

Dominican Sr. Carol Gilbert holds a sign after a Holy Week vigil in front of a park near the White House where people of various faiths prayed April 14 for immigrants who were imprisoned after being deported to El Salvador. The event took place as the U.S. and Salvadoran president met nearby. Gilbert said before the vigil began, authorities had closed the part of the park closest to the White House, perhaps so that those inside wouldn't hear the prayers of those gathered. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"This is the lesson that we should learn from Holy Week, that when we look upon the face of Kilmar … and all the people who suffer unjust persecution, when we look on their faces, we should see the face of the suffering Christ," said Pastor Michael Vanacore, of Pilgrim Church United Church of Christ in Wheaton, Maryland. "For every single soul that they send to that hellhole [prison] in El Salvador, we, in the United States, are putting another nail in Jesus' body."

After a lawsuit seeking Abrego's freedom, the U.S. Supreme Court told the Trump administration April 10 it had to "facilitate" the man's return but President Donald

Trump shifted the responsibility to El Salvador's president Nayib Bukele, whom he met at the White House as the vigil was taking place. Bukele said he couldn't "smuggle a terrorist" back into the U.S., referring to Abrego.

A group gathered outside the building that houses the Salvadoran embassy in Washington a few hours later used the word "terrorist" against Bukele chanting: "Bukele Fascista, vos sos el terrorista," or "Fascist Bukele, you are the terrorist."

Gilbert said before the vigil began, authorities had closed the part of the park closest to the White House, perhaps so that those inside wouldn't hear the prayers of the people of faith gathered nearby.

"Trump has the possibility of saying, 'Bring this man back to our country. Bring this man back.' And he won't even address it," Gilbert lamented. "We came out here to pray. This was a prayer service and we were removed. And look how far back we have to be from the White House because of the fear that exists when truth is spoken through prayer or through signs or through witness or through anything."

A group protests outside the building that houses the Salvadoran embassy April 14 in Washington. Some called out El Salvador’s president Nayib Bukele for not advocating for Salvadoran immigrants during his visit to the White House and also for incarcerating wrongfully accused detainees inside Terrorism Confinement Center, known as CECOT in El Salvador. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

She also briefly attended the gathering outside the embassy, calling out "Kilmar, Kilmar" on the busy road that faces the embassy, as cars drove by in the direction of the White House. Activists nearby railed against Bukele for not speaking up for Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S. during his White House visit. They also built a makeshift prison out of cardboard to call attention to abuses they say are taking place inside the "terrorism center" called CECOT — including many stories similar to Abrego's, of deported migrants sent there even before Trump took office.

In early January, Salvadoran mothers spoke with National Catholic Reporter warning others about their sons' wrongful imprisonment after they were deported from the U.S. during the Biden administration. Like Abrego, they were sent straight to prison by Bukele's government once they landed in El Salvador. Several mothers said their children lacked a criminal record.

A woman holds a sign near others gathered for a Holy Week vigil April 14 near the White House, praying for the freedom of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran deported in March. Abrego, along with other immigrants, was sent to a Salvadoran prison after being deported, even though he has no criminal record. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Abrego's case, however, has garnered international attention in no small part because Jennifer Vasquez Sura, Abrego's wife, has been tirelessly seeking support to free her husband and has received help from groups that organized the vigil and

other events, including Congregation Action Network, CASA, as well as other faith-based organizations.

Representatives from Catholic groups such as the Franciscan Action Network, Justice Team for Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and Catholic Workers also participated in the vigil, some carrying posters with quotes or images of Salvadoran St. Óscar Romero. Prince George's County State's Attorney Aisha Braveboy also attended and told Abrego's wife that "no matter where he is in the world, [Abrego] is still a resident of Prince George's County," and said the federal government is at fault. "They have to make it right."

U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Maryland, said he will travel to El Salvador to check on Abrego since he was not given the chance to speak with Bukele about freeing him during his U.S. visit. But the vigil reminded those gathered that there were other immigrants deported along with Abrego, who share in his terrible fate at the CECOT prison though they are not Salvadorans. They include Venezuelans: Andry José Hernández Romero, a makeup artist; Arturo Suárez-Trejo, a singer; and Neri José Alvarado Borges, a baker.

"They and every single one of the people detained and deported to that prison, they are the ones whom a Salvadoran priest and martyr, [Jesuit Fr.] Ignacio Ellacuria called the crucified peoples of the world," said Vanacore, the pastor. "And the only response during Holy Week is to take him down from the cross. Bring Kilmar home."

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Joelle Novey, a Jewish participant at the vigil, told those gathered that when human beings are held unjustly in captivity, "the injustice is so grotesque that God gets involved."

She spoke of shaving people's heads, as Bukele's government has done, taking the wrongly imprisoned far away from home and loved ones, and scoffing at judges who have ruled that they be freed, and said that "this violence disgusts and enrages the God who intends all of us only for honor and dignity and the gentlest touch."

Biblical accounts tell of the time when pharaohs imprisoned people unjustly, she said, and reminded them to look at the Book of Exodus.

"Let me remind you how this story ends every time: the plagues don't just come down on Pharaoh but on everyone in the sick society that enables this terrible wrong," she said. "The water turns to blood for Pharaoh and also for everyone who stood aside and said 'I don't look like an Israelite so that would never happen to me.' "

Scripture talks about those who keep their heads down, close their eyes, and keep on with their lives, ignoring the plight of the innocent, she added.

"The diseases, the swarms of insects, they don't just come for Pharoah, and they will come all of us, too, everyone who stands back and stays quiet and enables the tyrants right here in Washington, D.C., who are now straight up spitting in the face of God, seeing what we will do about it," Novey said.