

Current News: Prayers of thanksgiving for Regina Bakala's freedom

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Prayers of thanksgiving for Regina's freedom

[Work continues to prevent deportation to Congo](#)

By Maryangela Layman Román, Catholic Herald Staff

HALES CORNERS — Sr. Josephe Marie Flynn did a quick two-step and pumped her fist into the air as she entered the gathering space for a quickly planned press conference at St. Mary Parish on Monday afternoon. Just 90 minutes earlier, Sr. Flynn had received the unexpected news that the Atlanta Board of Immigration Appeals had decided to reopen the deportation case against Regina Bakala, granting the 42-year-old Congolese native a new hearing.

While she awaits the new hearing, likely to be in Atlanta, she has been granted permission to stay in the United States.

Regina, who has been in custody in the Kenosha Detention Center for more than two months, was released the following day and was greeted Tuesday afternoon at St. Mary Parish by hundreds of supporters, including school children, staff and teachers.

Speaking to the media Monday afternoon, Sr. Flynn, a School Sister of Notre Dame, who has been leading the fight to help Regina, described what she believes is a miraculous turn of events.

Days earlier, Regina's husband David was told his wife would likely be deported one day this week, as necessary paperwork had arrived from the Congo. He and the couple's two children, Lydia, 5, and Christopher (Coco), 4, prepared to say their final goodbyes.

St. Mary supporters knew Regina's future in the United States looked unlikely and held a prayer vigil on Sunday evening. Between 150 to 200 people attended and prayed for the Bakala family.

One day later, Sr. Flynn received the call from the attorney representing Bakala bringing the news the community had been praying for.

"I got the news from Attorney Mary Sfasciotti this afternoon shortly after 3 o'clock. (Sfasciotti) said this was such a longshot. In fact, she needed to call them back just to be sure, really sure that it was really, really true! By this point I was crying for joy and relief.... When (Sfasciotti) asked, 'Do you still want me to represent her?' I exclaimed, 'Are you kidding!'"

Sr. Flynn said she doesn't believe it was accidental that the decision to reopen the case came a day after the prayer vigil.

"Our God is an awesome God! And Monday was without doubt all God's day," she said.

After speaking with the attorney, Sr. Flynn said she began looking for Regina's number at the detention center. As she opened her address book, however, the phone rang and the voice told her she had a collect call from Regina.

Sr. Flynn said told her. "Regina. we just got the best news! The best news! The Board of Appeals has

decided to reopen your case.”

Regina began thanking God and soon the two women on the phone were in tears. Sr. Flynn said she heard others celebrating in the background at the detention center.

Next, Sr. Flynn contacted David, working in the maintenance department at Sacred Heart School of Theology. His first reaction, too, was to thank God.

“We prayed last night in church that God would do it — God did it. Thank God,” he said.

Sr. Flynn cautioned that just because Regina’s case is reopened doesn’t mean she won’t eventually be deported. The Bakalas and their supporters have a long road ahead of them, but according to Sr. Flynn, they have a new beginning.

David, with Lydia and Christopher on either side, arrived at the press conference beaming. A crowd of supporters cheered loudly as they entered. Stepping to the microphones, David thanked the supporters for their efforts.

“I feel happy not just for myself, but for all the people who were working for this case,” he said. “Thank you to God; he heard our prayers.”

After suffering abuse in the Congo because of her grassroots political activity for democracy, Regina arrived in North Carolina in July 1995 using a fraudulent visa. According to Sr. Flynn, she applied for asylum, but because of bungled legal assistance — including someone who took her entire fortune of \$4,000 and prepared a flawed affidavit — her case was never properly processed.

David and Regina relocated to Wisconsin and joined St. Mary Parish, Hales Corners about six years ago. Pastoral associate Mary Matestic was the first person to meet the couple. She helped David through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults and said the couple has become active members of the parish. Lydia graduated from kindergarten at St. Mary School on Wednesday and Regina and David were eucharistic ministers at the parish.

Their story has tugged at the heartstrings of the parish community, said Matestic, who noted that the parish and school have participated in letter-writing campaigns, fund raisers and petition drives to assist the family.

Teresa Lee, a St. Mary parishioner and member of the “Save Regina” committee at the parish, noted that St. Mary has received help from more than 20 area parishes as they pushed to help Regina.

Their efforts will continue, said Sr. Flynn who said that the cost to help Regina legally stay in the United States could reach \$100,000. To date, the committee has raised about \$20,000.

It will continue to be an uphill battle. In fact, while reopening the case, the Board of Immigration Appeals wrote that it is troubled with parts of the case, specifically issues regarding the timeframe of her marriage. The board did acknowledge her “well-founded fear of persecution.”

The board also acknowledged that David Bakala successfully demonstrated past persecution on account of his political opinion and involvement in the National Council of Resistance for Democracy.

For updates on Bakala’s case, see www.saveregina.org Donations can be sent to the M&I Bank Attention Regina Bakala Fund, 7600 W. Layton Ave., Milwaukee, WI, 53220.