

Shackling a samaritan

From the Editors in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Frank Almonte is a good man, an upright man, a man of peace. He gives of himself. He has, for example, built hospitals. He recently raised \$4 million for medical supplies, food and clothing for hurricane victims. A legal immigrant from the Dominican Republic, he has lived in Corona, Queens, for 22 years. A television and radio evangelist as well as a Pentecostal minister, Almonte is respected, even revered, far beyond his 1,000-member congregation at Adonai Christian Center in Corona.

But these days this widely esteemed pastor would be justified in feeling he is being tested like Job. Returning on January 29 from an evangelistic mission in his homeland, Almonte was arrested on drug charges by immigration officials at Kennedy International Airport, denied bail, shackled--ankles as well as hands--and taken by bus to a federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania (there being no vacancy at the New York facility). He was confined in a cold cell there for ten days. It took a lot of legal maneuvering--plus affidavits signed by prominent clergy--to gain his release prior to his next hearing. If convicted he faces up to seven years in prison, after which he would probably be deported.

What drugs was Almonte carrying? Not heroin, not cocaine, not a narcotic of any kind. In plain view, right on top in his luggage, were three small bottles of appetite-enhancing tablets intended for his underweight 12-year-old son, Joel. Cost: the equivalent of \$7.00. Though the pills had been prescribed by a physician in Santo Domingo, no prescription was really necessary; such pills are sold over the counter in the Dominican Republic. And since such pills are not only legal but commonly used in the DR, Almonte had no inkling that in the States they would be considered a controlled substance because they contain steroid properties and have not been approved by the Federal Drug Administration.

Ordinarily such medications would simply be confiscated, as with cigars from Cuba--and possibly entail a fine. But things got worse for Almonte when he stated his occupation. It was then that he was shackled and hauled away. The customs

inspectors seemed to take satisfaction in making an example of a man of the cloth. And although he had only three 100-count bottles clearly labeled as containing appetite-enhancers, he is charged not merely with possession of a controlled substance, but the more serious crime of "possession with intent to sell."

Almonte was arrested under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, a law passed in a climate increasingly marked by anti-immigrant sentiment. This law allows for the detention and deportation of any legal immigrant charged with or convicted of a drug crime--and it makes no distinction between hard drugs like cocaine and heroin and the steroidal drugs that are legal elsewhere. A year ago Franciscan priest Brian Jordan discussed in these pages some of the harsh and discriminatory provisions of the 1996 legislation (see the issue of March 18-25, 1998). The case of Pastor Almonte provides powerful further evidence why this law should be changed if not repealed.

At Almonte's first hearing a throng of his supporters waited outside the courthouse, singing hymns and shouting "Gloria a Dios!" If justice is served and the pastor is exonerated, his supporters and parishioners will have much more reason to shout "Gloria a Dios!"

Five days after the New York Times reported on Almonte's arrest and incarceration, it published a piece with a richly ironic headline: "U.S. Customs Admits Its Own Drug Corruption."