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The church can make a difference on immigration reform

by Pat Marrin

NCR Today

How did over 1,000 Guatemalans ever get to Postville, Iowa? The answer is an eye-opener on the larger crisis going on because of poverty-driven global migration.

Guatemala, one of the poorest nations in Central America, long ago joined bordering countries in sending much of its population north to escape violence and lack of opportunity. The trail of tears up through Mexico, riding on tops of freight trains, subject to drug gangs, corrupt local police and dangerous coyote crossings which is now the Ellis Island legacy of the latest generation of immigrants seeking entry into the United States.

While the need for cheap labor continues to draw them, they have found no Statue of Liberty and no welcome here. Lack of any coherent path to legalization has blunted but not stopped the flow, and hundreds of people have died in the deserts at the border.

The Postville ICE raid story goes back to the late 1980s, when investors opened a kosher meat processing plant that first attracted immigrant workers from Eastern Europe, then Asia and Mexico and more recently Central America. The slaughterhouse jobs were typically shunned by American workers and fell to immigrant groups, documented and undocumented, willing to do the dangerous and bracing work of providing meat for the American table.

Cheap labor and legal accommodation were profitable, and immigrant populations bolstered small town economies across the country. The Guatemalan community disrupted by the ICE raid in 2008 had been in Postville for a decade, and American-born children of undocumented workers filled the local school system. The new immigrants were transforming the Midwest in much the same way German immigrants

had transformed the heartland a century before.

U.S. Immigration policy has for decades tried to balance the need to secure our borders and the need for cheap labor. Poverty and instability in other parts of the world, often the result of our own economic policies and trade laws that favored large corporations, kept the flow of undocumented workers coming because there were jobs here. Legal reform was needed but difficult to achieve politically.

The failure of the modest Kennedy/McCain Comprehensive Immigration Reform Bill in Congress in 2007 poisoned hopes for a reasonable solution to the growing numbers of undocumented people backed up in the system under more generous immigration bills passed in the 1990s. Post-9/11 fear-mongering by nativist groups aided by shock media made drove millions of people into the shadows, subjecting them to exploitation in a flourishing underground economy, where they paid taxes but were unable to access social services, healthcare or seek legal protection from predators.

The recent failure in Congress of the 'Dream Act,' which would have recognized the potential of some 65,000 immigrant children pursuing college or military service is one more example of how paralyzed the nation has become in addressing real problems with low-cost solutions that work for everyone.

At an NCR-sponsored conference last Spring in Washington, DC, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi begged the churches to jump in and provide leadership on immigration reform. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have a chance to apply their deep justice tradition to one of the biggest human-rights issues facing the country today. Failure to achieve immigration reform will doom millions of people eager to contribute to the economy and, by birth and culture, members of the Catholic church, to a limbo of anonymity and unnecessary suffering.

This is why Celebration is convening a conference on the church's role in immigration reform in San Antonio on Jan. 12-14. One meeting will not solve the immigration crisis nor will it focus the church's full response. But it will get the issues out on the table and help shape the questions that must be addressed if a solution is to be found and if a Catholic voice will be part of it.

I invite you to visit the Celebration Web site for more information about the conference.

celebrationpublications.org/conference

In my next blog I will tell you more about why we have invited Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley from El Salvador to be with us in San Antonio to talk about immigration reform and the role of the church. The issue is critical and the timing could not be better.

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By Pat Marrin, *Celebration* editor

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