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Immigration challenges church to respond with courage

by Pat Marrin

Immigration and the Church



Sr. Mary McCauley accompanies Rosa Zamora and her daughters, who wait to meet their father two-and-half years after the Postville raid.

SAN ANTONIO ? Sr. Mary McCauley, her silver hair framing a classic Irish face, could easily seem a diminutive nun in her 70s looking at retirement after a lifetime in the classroom or convent administration.

But circumstances and, she would say, divine providence put her at St. Bridget Church as pastoral administrator in May 2008, when hundreds of FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents swooped down on the tiny town of Postville in northeastern Iowa to round up hundreds of undocumented - ? mostly Guatemalan ?- workers at a kosher meat-processing plant.

Alerted to the raid, McCauley put out the word to the workers and their families: "Tell them to come to the church."

For many, the Postville story has come to exemplify the human toll exacted by a failed immigration

policy and the challenge to churches to respond with courage and compassion on an issue of decisive importance to our national identity ?- and even possibly the fate of the church in the United States.

McCauley, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Dubuque, Iowa, told the story of the infamous ICE raid and its aftermath as part of a conference sponsored by *Celebration*, the worship resource of the *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan 12-14 in San Antonio.

Titled "A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church's Global Commitment to the Poor," the conference program included Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley from San Salvador; Jesuit Fr. Jake Embereur, a liturgical scholar; Jeanette Rodriguez, professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University; Holy Cross Fr. Dan Groody, director of Notre Dame's Center for Latino Spirituality and Culture; and Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M.

The purpose of the conference was to explore the facts of the immigration crisis and to offer strategies to pastors, liturgists and activists on how to form their communities in the teachings of the Gospel as articulated by the U.S Catholic bishops on the issue of immigration.

McCauley's talk, titled "The Postville Raid: What Mother Church Can Do," offered the 140 conference attendees an account of the raid, which gained national attention and became emblematic of the human impact of the lack of a coherent, updated political solution to the question of what to do with an estimated 11 million undocumented people currently in the United States.

Border enforcement and deportations alone, ramped up since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have not stemmed the tide of people entering the country, most often to escape poverty and violence in their own countries, and lured by jobs often unfilled by the American work force.

The workers arrested in Postville that day had been part of an established community for over 10 years, an economic mainstay for the town, as workers, consumers and parents, many with American-born children.

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"After an hour or so of standing outside the plant," McCauley recalled, "I recognized that there was nothing -- absolutely nothing -- I could do for the 389 arrested workers who were soon to be stripped, searched, shackled and forced onto buses bound for the Cattle Congress in Waterloo.

"Innately, I knew that my presence was needed at St. Bridget's. I returned to the church only to discover a group of women huddled together with their children. A young boy approached me and said: 'Can our friends come too?' My spontaneous response was: 'Of course they can -- tell anyone who is afraid or alone to come to St. Bridget's.'"

It marked the beginning of days and nights of chaos and terror for the families, who did not know the fate of those arrested at the plant. Some, mostly mothers, were released to care for their children, but wearing large, black GPS monitoring devices secured to their ankles.

Days turned into weeks, then months, as area religious communities of women, a nearby Lutheran college, Archbishop Jerome Hanus from Dubuque, volunteers and donors formed a network of material support, pro bono legal counsel, compassion and prayer for the distraught community.

For her efforts, McCauley received widespread support but also piles of hate mail, accusing her of "harboring those illegals" and suggesting that she should "move the church to Mexico or Guatemala if

you love the illegal alien so much."

McCauley said she was sustained by the realization that the crisis had revealed the core mystery of the church's mission to reveal God's love through the gift of the Eucharist.

"The story of Postville is the story of the church," she said. "It is the story of the body of Christ. It is the story of Eucharist, which we tell and retell day after day in order to be transformed.

"Like the Eucharist, the Postville story is a story of commitment and brokenness. It is a story of hope and love, of pain and exploitation, of collaboration and of indefatigable fidelity. It is a story of humiliation and helplessness. It is a story of broken bodies and a story of minds, hearts and spirits of incredible strength."

Keynote speaker Brackley, who traveled to San Antonio from El Salvador, placed the issues of U.S. immigration reform in the larger context of global economic injustice.

Most immigrants come to the U.S. to work to feed their families, Brackley said.

Despite the propaganda that they come here illegally to take what we have, the facts show that most migrants would rather stay in their own countries, but conditions are so desperate, often the result of U.S. trade policies that have destroyed local economies, or of past U.S. interventions and support for repressive governments.

"They are not coming here to pursue the American dream as much as to escape the Latin American nightmare," said the Jesuit.

U.S.-born Brackley went to the Jesuits' Central American University in San Salvador 20 years ago to help replace faculty members who had been assassinated by the U.S.-supported military during El Salvador's brutal civil war, which killed 75,000, mostly civilians, and devastated the tiny country.

Brackley said that he finds hope in the profound mystery of God's identification with the poor, the "crucified of history."

The poor are the "light to the nations," the ones who invite us to conversion and salvation, he said. To turn away from their suffering and to neglect their cries is to fail to hear the Gospel or to know Jesus, who told us in the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25 that he has gone before us into the poor, the hungry, thirsty, naked and the stranger, and that is where we must find him and serve him.

Empereur explored the idea that the church's liturgy provides a model for just globalization -? shared economic development that respects cultural diversity and participation.

Empereur emphasized the importance of imagination: "We must first imagine a more just world." Liturgy is where we imagine God's intentions for creation and community.

Empereur reminded the conference: "In the future the majority of Catholics will be living in poor countries." He concluded by invoking Jesus' parable of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19-31) as an image of rich countries with extreme poverty at their very doorsteps.

Rodriguez explored the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, declared patroness of all of the Americas to affirm a range of values the church promotes for the just treatment of the poor.

The story of Juan Diego and the Lady is deeply layered and rich in symbols, she said.

"Many think it is about the conversion of the Indian peoples. It is about the conversion of a bishop, to whom a poor man was sent with the request to build a house for her, not in the center of power but among the indigenous peoples," she said.

Groody, an internationally recognized expert on migration, offered a big-picture view of migration as a human reality.

"DNA tracking reveals that we are all migrants," he said. "Today, more than ever, is the age of migration, with over 1 billion people on the move because of economic dislocation. Half the world's population survives on less than \$2 a day."

Groody sees a compelling theology of migration in the mystery of Jesus, God entering our world as a migrant to show us how to find our way home to the "beloved community" God wants for us.

Ramirez summarized the U.S. bishops' widely publicized letters, resources and teaching aids available in print and online to the churches. Yet he also recognized the tensions and the challenges involved in reaching and forming many Catholics who do not understand or support immigration reform.

He spoke of one bishop at a listening session who had salsa thrown at him.

Every year on Nov. 2, Ramirez joins other U.S. bishops and their Mexican counterparts for the annual border Mass at Sunland Park, N.M., near El Paso, Texas. This Eucharist, celebrated from both sides of the chainlink fence marking the border, is always, he said, the central sign of what church teaches, that we are one body without borders.

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, and helped organize the conference in San Antonio. His e-mail address is pmarrin@ncronline.org.]

For texts of most conference talks see the Celebration Web site at CelebrationPublications.org/conference.

Do you have story to share about your experience with immigration? Send your stories to immigration@ncronline.org.

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