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Church, country face immigration crisis with no borders

by NCR Editorial Staff

For anyone who thinks of immigration reform as just another issue down on the border, the truth is that the crisis has no borders ? it is everywhere, and it is shaping up to be one of the most decisive challenges we face as country and as church.

The immediacy of the border is no better illustrated than by what happened in May 2008, not in Arizona or New Mexico, but in northeastern Iowa, where immigration trouble might have been only a memory for the great-grandchildren of the hardy German and Irish farmers who settled Middle America in the late 1800s.

Instead, Postville, Iowa, was the scene of the largest immigration raid in U.S. history. The raid at a kosher meat-packing plant netted for imprisonment and deportation hundreds of mostly Guatemalan workers without proper documents. It tore apart families and rocked the entire community, but it also occasioned a response from the town's Catholic church, St. Bridget, that has modeled just what ?Mother Church? can do when a broken, outdated immigration policy puts legal enforcement ahead of common sense and ordinary compassion.

Sr. Mary McCauley, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Dubuque, Iowa, and pastoral administrator at St. Bridget, opened the church doors to receive more than 400 men, women and children seeking refuge. In the weeks following the raid, she and a large network of area communities of women, with the Dubuque diocese and Jewish and Protestant partners, mounted a legal and material support system to represent the immigrant community.

What made Postville a national story was the severity of a deportation-only policy inflicted on real people. What the story also revealed was that the dilemmas of immigration are surfacing in towns and cities across the county, where an estimated 11 million undocumented people live in rental housing, work

on farms and in factories, supermarkets, restaurants, hotels and construction sites, asking only for a path to legal status and to be treated like human beings.

Any solutions need to combine respect for our borders and the rule of law with a chance for newcomers to make it here. America once welcomed economic and political refugees as the lifeblood of its democratic experiment. That was before 9/11. Security alerts, cultural anxiety, and a recession are now fueling a propaganda war against the poor that is itself a threat to our national integrity and sense of fairness. Immigrants are being lured here with low-wage jobs Americans won't do, and then they are abused, exploited, and demonized as lawbreakers and terrorists.

History reveals that immigrants are us, here to work in order to feed their families, just as our ancestors once were. Churchgoing Catholics celebrate every time they go to Mass that all are welcome, that there are no strangers before God and no borders in the Eucharist, which we believe is the one body of Christ in the world.

Some say that a leaner and meaner America is inevitable and necessary to save ourselves, our privileged position in the world, and even our national security. NCR believes instead that the only way forward is to be the people we like to imagine ourselves to be: a generous, open and courageous people willing to welcome those who, like us, will play fair and work hard, build community, and treat others as they want to be treated.

For our church, far more is at stake. How can we celebrate Mass if we fail to welcome our own brothers and sisters at the altar and in Communion? If we deny them, will we also be denying Christ? Is it not Jesus himself there at the door, knocking? Do we have enough faith to open our hearts to a future he is offering us?

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