

The Day of the Raid

By Sr. Mary McCauley, BVM, former Pastoral Administrator of St. Bridget, Postville

“That day scarred my heart forever.”

These were the words Postville resident, Pedro Lopez, a 12 year old used to describe the day when ICE agents, helicopters, state police, sheriffs, local police, and journalists stormed into Postville. It was on this day, May 12, 2008 that ICE agents arrested 389 people and conducted at the time the largest immigration raid in the history of the United States. The raid took place at Agriprocessors, the local kosher meat packing plant. The day that “*scarred Pedro’s heart forever,*” changed the lives of innumerable people, traumatized an entire population and shattered a town.

The first reaction of Paul Rael, the St. Bridget Hispanic Minister, to the sight and sound of the helicopters was to rush to the homes of the Hispanic people who were not at Agriprocessors. He informed them of their rights and how they might respond to the raid taking place at the plant. Sister Mary McCauley, BVM, the Pastoral Administrator for this cluster of parishes, dropped everything she was doing in her office in Monona and drove immediately to the plant, hoping to offer presence and support to those being arrested.

Statistical Information:

- **Of the over 950 employees at Agriprocessors 75 % were undocumented persons.**
- **ICE agents were prepared with over 600 arrest warrants, but second and third shift workers were not in the plant at the time of the raid, hence only 389 were arrested.**
- **The majority of those arrested were men.**
- **Most of the people were from Guatemala.**
- **Around 90 were from Mexico, 4 from the Ukraine and 3 from Israel.**
- **56 were released with ankle bracelets, for humanitarian or health reasons, mostly women to care for their children.**
- **12 minors were released with ankle bracelets.**

After an hour of standing outside the plant and not being able to see any of the people directly affected she returned to St. Bridget’s. Here she discovered a few women and their small children huddled together. A small bilingual boy approached her and asked, “*Can our friends come too?*” Her spontaneous response was, “*Of course they can. Tell anyone who is afraid or alone to come to St. Bridget’s!*” And this is what they did!

By 7:00 that evening over 400 men, women and children were pouring into St. Bridget’s. They came to be with one another; to pray and cry together; to receive strength from one another. They were too afraid to be alone in their homes for fear that ICE officials might come to their door, so they came to St. Bridget’s for they trusted that the Church and the broader Postville Community would guide and help them at this most horrible time in their lives.

Around 3:00 on the afternoon of the raid two teachers from Luther College, namely Luz Marie Hernandez and Pastor David Vasquez, arrived with computers in hand. They said, “*We are here to help!*” Little did we know what that word help would mean for from that moment until the middle of August they led much of our legal, data gathering, media and political response. In particular they focused on the needs of the minors and the women with the GPS devices on their ankles.

By Monday evening Sister Mary McCauley, BVM and Paul Rael were joined by the other two members of their cluster staff, namely, Fr. Paul Ouderkirk and Fr. Richard Gaul. Father Paul’s presence was particularly significant for he was the retired pastor. He was known by the people, was well aware of their pain and had the added gift of being bilingual. Father Richard Gaul, the Sacramental priest for the three parish cluster, remained present to our Hispanic, as well as the other members of our cluster community.

- **What Happened in the First Week Following the Raid**

For the six days following the raid St. Bridget’s became a “*safe haven*” for our people from Mexico and Guatemala. It also became a center for people to reach out and respond. During that time meals were provided by members of St. Bridget’s and other neighboring churches; lawyers, clergy, medical personnel, translators, drivers, social workers, and friends came to offer their special expertise and presence.



By Tuesday morning, May 13, calls offering assistance were coming to us from all over the United States. Of particular note were people from El Centro Latino Americano in Waterloo, Representatives from the Catholic Charities Office of Migration and Refugee

Services in Des Moines, the [Iowa Catholic Conference](#), as well as National Immigration Advocacy Organizations.

Archbishop Jerome Hanus, OSB, along with other priests of the Archdiocese of Dubuque called to affirm and support our response to this humanitarian disaster. Members of the various religious communities within the area, especially those who were bilingual, responded generously with presence, service and financial support.

Throughout the years a strong ecumenical relationship had develop among the leadership of the Postville Churches. What a blessing this was! Pastor Stephen Brackett of St. Paul Lutheran Church shared his pastoral insights, financial acuity and technological know how on a daily basis. He was also in a position to raise the awareness of the membership of the various Lutheran Churches within the Northeast Iowa Synod to our need. Pastor Gary Catterson of the Postville Presbyterian Church focused his efforts on our Postville Food Pantry.

In addition to the presence and help of people from the Postville and neighboring communities, how grateful we were for the faithful presence of Sr. Judy Callahan, BVM, Director of the Archdiocesan Office of Hispanic Ministry and staff members of the Archdiocesan Office of Catholic Charities.

Close communication with the Postville School Community during the week of the raid was vital. Children who spent the night with us were picked up at St. Bridget's and returned there at the end of the school day. Counselors and teachers from the school devoted their after school hours to their students, engaging them in games, craft projects and reading.

In the midst of all of this activity staff members at St. Bridget's gave innumerable interviews to journalists and documentary filmmakers. Each request was treated with respect for we knew that unless the story of our people became public, change in our immigration laws would not occur.

Our goal during the immediate days following the raid was to respond to the myriad needs of fearful, anxious and traumatized men, women and children. We desired to stand in solidarity with them; to assure them that they were safe; and to encourage them to give strength to one another.

An extremely time consuming and challenging task during the first week was to work with Agriprocessors in order to help workers and family members of detained workers obtain and ultimately cash checks owed to them by their employer. The obtaining of documentation for children born in the United States also became a major focus. Such a document ensures that the birth certificate is valid and will be recognized as valid in another country, giving to the person certain rights and privileges. How important this was for those who feared deportation!

On Saturday, May 17, [Archbishop Jerome Hanus, OSB](#) came to Postville to celebrate Eucharist and to meet with all who had been affected by the raid.

We considered this to be the culminating event for our first week. Following this celebration we asked our people to return to their homes. We assured them that we would continue to be present to them, responding to their questions, concerns, fear and pain.

On the Sunday following the raid with the help of experienced leaders from other immigration and refugee service offices, we traveled to Waterloo, Iowa with about 75 of our people to participate in a prayer service at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church and then a walk to the Cattle Congress, a 60 acre Cattle Fair Ground that was transformed into a detention center for those detained in the raid.

Our people had been receiving services all week. It was now time for them to engage in action. It was a privilege to be walking with the women and men who were very aware that they had entered the United States without the proper documentation but believed that they had no other choice. It was on this day that many of the women with GPS devices on their ankles rolled their slacks to their knees so that others could see their ankle bracelets. They carried signs that read: *We are not criminals. We are mothers. We came to feed our families.*



By the end of the first week we were receiving significant financial assistance from people throughout the United States. Because of the publicity we received people were beginning to hear the story. They knew the dire need, they were shocked by the action of our government and wanted to offer whatever help they could. With each check came special letters of support for the work that we were doing. Letters of discontent and criticism were also received.

May 12, 2008 was only the beginning for the St. Bridget Response Team. Our daily faithful and committed presence to the people affected by the raid has taken a variety of forms, such as,

- a listening ear
- the serving of a meal
- a drive to Des Moines for finger printing
- paying of bills for those who cannot work
- sharing the Postville story with other communities
- tracking and expressing gratitude for the many donations of food and money
- securing necessary documents so the process of citizenship can begin
- arranging for transportation for those returning to their home countries
- stacking shelves at the Postville Food Pantry
- contacting immigration lawyers
- securing counseling for those traumatized by the raid
- responding to whatever the need of the moment might be
- participating in a city dialogues about how to help others who came to take the jobs of our Hispanics and are now also unemployed
- urging of our Congressional Representatives to advocate for worker justice, family unity, an end to raids and comprehensive immigration reform.

Convinced of the importance of communicating with our United States legislators an effort was made to have Congresspersons visit Postville. On Saturday, July 26, three members of the Hispanic Caucus came: [Rep. Joseph Baca](#) of California; [Rep. Luis Gutierrez](#) of Illinois and [Rep. Albio Sires](#) of New Jersey. Individuals from the community shared their heartbreaking stories. It is our hope that these Congresspersons will remember these stories, will share them with other members of Congress and that the tragedy of Postville will serve as an impetus for bringing about a change in our immigration law.

Because of our experience and the complexity of the issues we knew it was imperative for us to engage in social advocacy efforts. For this reason we worked closely with two Jewish Organizations, one from Minnesota ([Jewish Community Action](#)) and one from Chicago ([Jewish Council on Urban Affairs](#)) in organizing a major prayer and rally on Sunday, July 27. On that afternoon over 1000 people converged on Postville to pray and to make a public plea for comprehensive immigration reform, no more raids, family unity and just labor practices. Leaders from the Catholic Community, the Lutheran Community and the Jewish Community led this event. Our interfaith collaborative efforts have proved to be invaluable.



The raid, along with some of the alleged unjust labor practices that took place at Agriprocessors, had a devastating psychological affect on our people. Throughout the course of the summer we became aware of the serious need to offer individual and group therapy to many. Because of a minimum number of bilingual therapists in Northeast Iowa, this has been and continues to be a serious challenge and ongoing need.

A highlight of the month of November was the visit of Rigoberta Menchu, the 1992 Nobel Peace prizewinner from Guatemala. She had come to listen to her people and to hear their stories. Her hope was to bring [national and international awareness](#) to the injustices endured by the people of Postville.



To all of the people who have been a part of our response either through prayer, presence or financial donation we express sincere gratitude. In a special way we acknowledge the services of the current members of the St. Bridget response team. It is their day in and day out fidelity and compassionate presence to our Hispanic brothers and sisters that has given and continues to give them hope and says to them,

“We love you...You are important...We are here to help.”