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People at interfaith prayer service, rally urge justice for migrants

By Barb Arland-Fye Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- Inside a Catholic church in northeast Iowa July 27, a rabbi from Chicago pondered the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty at a gathering of 500 people of various faiths.

The common denominator for him and the interfaith crowd was a commitment to social justice in the aftermath of a May 12 immigration raid that disrupted life in tiny Postville.

Just a couple of blocks away in downtown Postville, a woman in a Statute of Liberty costume and crown held a picket sign that read: "Save the American Worker." The common denominator for her and about 100 other picketers lining one side of the downtown was opposition to illegal immigration.

Both sides eventually crossed paths as the people in the church joined other supporters outside St. Bridget Catholic Church on a march first to Agriprocessors, the meat processing plant where the raid occurred, and then through the downtown.

Police officers, sheriff's deputies and Iowa state troopers patrolled the downtown area to prevent altercations. Chanting on each side of the downtown street grew louder as each group tried to make their point stand out.

"No more raids; keep families together," the St. Bridget's group chanted. People on the other side responded with slogans against illegal immigration.

Altogether, about 2,000 people from throughout the Midwest made their way to this town of 2,200 whose motto is "Hometown to the World."

Participants at the St. Bridget's interfaith prayer service, march and rally included Jews, Catholics and people of other faiths from the Diocese of Davenport. Postville is in the neighboring Archdiocese of Dubuque.

Organizers of the interfaith event were St. Bridget's, Jewish Community Action of St. Paul, Minn., the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs of Chicago, and Luther College in Decorah.

"As Jews, we are commanded to welcome the stranger and treat people with dignity," Vic Rosenthal, executive director of Jewish Community Action, said in a statement. "We want justice for all workers, and are especially disappointed that a plant producing kosher food has brought such pain to its workers."

During the raid, 389 employees were arrested and detained. The children of some of those arrested were left wondering for days what had happened to an arrested parent. Critics of the raid also were concerned about working conditions at the plant. An investigation of alleged

labor problems was halted by the raid, some media outlets reported.

Standing outside the plant during the rally, Getzel Rubashkin, who said he is a grandson of Agriprocessors' founder, defended the company's integrity and said that it is being tried by the media. He emphasized he was speaking on behalf of himself.

Jane Ramsey of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs said in a statement prepared for the July 27 rally: "Our rallying in support of the detained Agriprocessors' workers exemplifies our unified determination that injustice in any one part of the country impacts us all. We are fortified in our resolve and will work tirelessly to achieve worker justice and comprehensive immigration reform."

That was the central theme of the prayer service at St. Bridget's. Archbishop Jerome G. Hanus of Dubuque was the presiding bishop at the service, which was conducted in English, Spanish and Hebrew.

Sister Mary McCauley, pastoral administrator at St. Bridget's and a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Paul Rael, director of the parish's Hispanic ministries, gave the welcome, or "bienvenida."

"This is a call for justice. This is a call to the faithful to our American and religious values. This is a call to stand in solidarity with our Latino brothers and sisters," said Sister McCauley, who opened up the church to frightened families seeking help in the days and weeks following the raid.

The Rev. Mark Anderson, assistant to the bishop for the Northeastern Iowa Lutheran Synod, urged the gathering to call upon legislators to fix existing immigration law so that "people of faith don't have to choose between what is legal and what is righteous."

Archbishop Hanus prayed that legislators would have the courage to make immigration reform a priority for the next legislative session.

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