

IMMIGRATION-COMMUNITY May-28-2008 (730 words) xxxn

Iowa community rallies to help families after raids

By Dave Cushing Catholic News Service

WATERLOO, Iowa (CNS) -- As the people arrested in a May 12 immigration raid in Iowa were processed and sent off to prison or deported, church leaders, pastoral ministers and community organizers in northeast Iowa struggled with what they called the tragic and devastating effects of the enforcement action.

After nearly 400 people were arrested at Agriprocessors, a meat processing plant in Postville, the faith community responded the following Sunday with a prayer service, a conference on how the community could help affected families, and a march to the cattle fairgrounds where the arrested workers were held initially.

Father Jose Comparan, pastoral administrator of Queen of Peace Catholic Church and director of Hispanic ministry in Waterloo, said the events were intended to create awareness of what was happening and how people are being affected.

"We also wanted the government to know that we do not approve of their actions," he said.

Pastoral leaders and parishioners of St. Bridget Catholic Parish in Postville, which was on the front lines of trying to assist arrested workers and their families, were joined in Waterloo by representatives of other churches, including union representatives and the local bishop for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"The government's action has created fear and destroyed a vibrant community," Lutheran Bishop Steve Ullestad told the crowd of Latinos and Anglos gathered at Queen of Peace. "We must stand together and demand that a tragedy like this will never happen again."

Ann Naffier, an immigration specialist with the American Friends Service Committee, which helped coordinate legal counsel for the detainees, said: "These people are not criminals. This is not the way America should be solving its problems."

What the nation needs, she said, is an immigration policy that "recognizes the economic and political realities of immigration."

One of the workers who was arrested during the raid said at the event that "the only thing I was thinking of was my children." Like most of the mothers who were detained, she was released later in the week and must now wear a monitoring device on her ankle, pending a court appearance.

"We wonder what is going to happen to us now," the young mother said through an interpreter. "To anyone who can do anything about this, I say give my husband back to me -- give our families back to us."

Kathleen McQuillen, of the American Friends Service Committee, said the country needs "a new civil rights campaign" to ensure the rights of immigrant workers.

She reminded critics who believe immigrants without documentation should be arrested that not too long ago "it was illegal to drink from a white water fountain if your skin was black; it was illegal to vote if you were a woman; it was illegal for black and white children to attend school together."

McQuillen said people need to remember the words of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: "No human person is illegal."

Two weeks after the Postville raid, Paul Real, the Hispanic minister at St. Bridget, said the parish was working at helping families get the money and documents they would need to accompany deported workers back to their home countries -- primarily Guatemala and Mexico.

A majority of the 389 people arrested at Agriprocessors were charged with felonies such as using a false ID. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency typically only charges workers arrested in such raids with being in the country illegally, a civil code violation, and deports them immediately.

In this case, ICE was offering plea agreement deals with the felony charges -- five months imprisonment followed by immediate deportation and a waiver of the right to separate immigration proceedings afterward. The charge could carry a sentence of two years.

Real told Catholic News Service May 27 that the parish food pantry had been open almost every day, instead of the usual once-a-week schedule and that many people were coming for assistance in paying bills, because the family breadwinner was jailed.

"We're trying to get people as legally prepared as possible to travel -- getting their passports, birth certificates for their kids," he said. "They're all going home."

Real estimated about a quarter of St. Bridget's parishioners, in a town of 2,300 people, were immigrants. Many of the Guatemalan workers are members of evangelical churches, he said.

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