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Clergy, religious offer perspectives on aftermath of Postville raid

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- Reverberations from the immigration raid in Postville last May are still being felt in the town and throughout the Archdiocese of Dubuque, of which Postville is a part.

Archbishop Jerome G. Hanus of Dubuque said he takes comfort in "the recognition of Christ in the visitor" when thinking about the church's response to the raid, which led to 389 arrests, immigration and identity-theft charges against more than 300 of those arrested, and the deportations of scores of immigrants, most from Guatemala and Mexico.

The archbishop said he also finds hope in Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel: "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."

Since the raid, "I preach on this (theme) every other homily. I'm catechizing," he said in an April 20 interview in Dubuque with Catholic News Service.

Sister Mary McCauley, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary who had been doing pastoral ministry at St. Bridget Parish in Postville, was scheduled to retire from active ministry last July. But because of the raid and the continuing needs as hundreds of lives were disrupted in its aftermath, she stayed on until last October.

She's hardly sitting in a rocking chair counting rosary beads. "I'm going everywhere I can to talk about the anniversary," she said in the same April 20 interview. A one-year remembrance interfaith prayer service and procession was to take place May 12, with St. Bridget hosting the event.

"I would say goodbye to the people as they were being deported," Sister Mary recalled. "They would say, 'It's OK.' And the archbishop knows that I would say, 'But it's not OK.'"

Rabbi Aron M. Schimmel, of the Hasidic branch of Orthodox Judaism, is in a more difficult position. He is executive director of the Judaic Resource Center in Postville. Among the center's main benefactors was Sholom Rubashkin, CEO of Agriprocessors -- the largest kosher meatpacking plant in the world -- from 1987 until investigations into the company's business practices and worker treatment led to his stepping down soon after the raid.

Agriprocessors shut the plant in November, making for shortages of kosher meat and driving up its price. Rubashkin and Agriprocessors face thousands of federal and state counts on not paying workers and vendors, unsafe working conditions and more.

Rabbi Schimmel, in an April 21 interview with CNS, blamed unidentified parties for acting "in such a way that it kills the whole company." He added, "There are lots people looking negatively on the Jewish community" since the raid. He notes that up to 25 of the area's 85

Jewish families have left since Agriprocessors' woes became public.

He said Rubashkin suffered from "a PR problem" because he was too private a person, and declared that other firms and their CEOs survived despite even harsher complaints of misdeeds.

The raid's fallout was felt even among American citizens. The Rev. Stephen Brackett, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Postville, told the story of a 72-year-old member of his congregation who was owed \$45,000 by Agriprocessors for driving a truck.

"He had conversations on a personal basis with Sholom Rubashkin," Rev. Brackett said. "For him, that's part of his retirement money." With the plant closed, the truck driver is unlikely to collect more than pennies on the dollar from what he is owed, the minister added.

"This last year has just been incredible," Rev. Brackett said in an April 21 interview. "People are tired. People keep telling me how tired I look. I have worked most of my days off."

He likes the ethnic diversity uncommon in a town Postville's size. But without a plant, "the Jews won't have a reason to stay," he said, and without work, "the Hispanics won't have a reason to stay."

"It's a tragedy," Archbishop Hanus said. "It's sad that it happened." But the life of the archdiocese has been "totally changed" because of the raid, he added, and because of that, "it's been a grace."

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