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Guatemalan workers in Iowa reunite with family members they left behind

By Sister Carol Hoverman Catholic News Service

POSTVILLE, Iowa (CNS) -- More than two dozen Guatemalans were reunited in December with their family members, eight former Agriprocessors workers whom they had not seen in years.

Many of the travelers were children whose mothers left Guatemala years ago to earn money in Postville to send back to their families. Some were parents or siblings of former underage teen workers.

"It was a very emotional moment," said Sister Mary McCauley, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was among those who met the bus as it pulled up Dec. 4 in front of St. Bridget Church in Postville.

Sister Mary was pastoral administrator at the Postville parish at the time of the largest immigration raid in U.S. history at the Agriprocessors kosher meat packing plant on May 12, 2008. "Seeing their faces as they recognized loved ones was indescribable!"

Although it was 73 degrees when the group left Guatemala, the warmth of the ecstatic welcomes overshadowed the frigid Iowa temperature and the more than 7 inches of snow on the ground in Postville.

The group was soon ushered inside the warm church hall, where a large crowd had gathered.

After a rousing welcome, there was a short time for prayers of gratitude. Sister Mary recalled the tears that flowed in that room the day of the raid in 2008. "Now this room is filled with tears for a very different reason," she said.

The Rev. David Vasquez, a campus minister at Luther College in Decorah, invited one of the immigrants to also say a few words.

In a telephone interview with The Witness, Dubuque archdiocesan newspaper, Rev. Vasquez summarized the message of Federico Solvi, 56, who stepped forward to represent the group.

"(Solvi) said the newcomers were so appreciative of the efforts of those who made their coming to the U.S. possible," Rev. Vasquez recalled. "Loosely translated, (Solvi) thanked those 'whose hearts are so large they do not fit into their chests.'"

"He also challenged the newcomers to take advantage of the opportunities they now have, to advocate, not just for themselves, but to join in the struggle for justice," he added.

Rev. Vasquez reported that Solvi said the decision to come was bittersweet, as it meant leaving other family members in Guatemala. But the political and economic situation in the

country is so bad that this move gives the families a chance for a new life for their children. "People are dying from hunger in Guatemala," Solvi said.

The reunion was the culmination of months of legal work headed by Sonia Parras Konrad, a Des Moines immigration lawyer who engaged in hours of pro-bono work representing many of the families. She went to Postville shortly after the raid and documented the criminal mistreatment that workers had endured under the former Agriprocessors administration.

These immigrant workers, who later cooperated with the federal investigation, were now eligible to apply for a U visa -- a relatively new immigration document.

The U visa is available when it is proven that an individual has experienced substantial physical and mental abuse as a result of a criminal violation. It allows those who have been victims of certain crimes to stay in the United States and to legally bring immediate family members to this country to apply for temporary legal status. The U visa allows immigrants to stay and work in the United States for up to four years, according to www.usimmigrationsupport.org. If conditions are met in the future, those with the visas and their family members can eventually pursue the path to U.S. citizenship.

Although this was a happy day for eight families, Sister Mary said there were 389 arrested the day of the 2008 raid. Most of them were rushed through mass court proceedings at the Cattle Congress in Waterloo, jailed for five months and deported to Guatemala and Mexico without the benefit of legal counsel.

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