

Why Should We Care and Be Involved?
Interfaith Alliance....Des Moines, Iowa
November 9, 2008

I would first of all like to say what a privilege it is for me to be with you today. I thank all of you for being here. Your presence and your desire to be more informed about immigration issues tells me that you already know the answer to the question posed through the title of this concluding presentation. My hope during this session is to confirm, ratify and possibly expand your response to the question. **Why should we care and be involved?**

It would be impossible for me to respond to that question without sharing with you a bit about my experience in Postville. I would like to set the stage by taking you back to Friday, May 9, 2008. I am in my office at St. Patrick's in Monona (I served as the Pastoral Administrator of the parishes in McGregor, Monona and Postville) and I received a call from Carlos Rios....some of you may know Carlos....and very quietly yet firmly he asked me... *"Have you heard the rumor?"* *"What rumor, I asked?"* *"The rumor that very likely within the following week there will be an immigration raid in Postville."* My response: *"No, I had not heard the rumor...but I was very aware of the apparent preparations at the Cattle Congress in Waterloo. And in my mind and heart I was hoping against hope that Postville would not be the target. He then asked me where Paul Rael was as he could not locate him....Paul serves as the Hispanic Minister at St. Bridget's and was away for a three day weekend attending the graduation of a family member. Without trying to scare me half out of my wits Carlos said, "This is very serious."*

I hung up the phone and thought ...*what do I do?* I also thought oh why did Paul....my right hand person have to take off this weekend...and he wasn't just in Cedar Rapids or Waterloo but he was in Western Iowa....needless to say an immediate call was made to his home and office asking him to contact me as soon as he returned....On Saturday morning I received another call...this time from Tony Leys, a reporter from your Des Moines Register.... *"Had I heard the rumor?"* By then I was convinced that Postville was the target but surely it would not be until later on in the week...after all Paul was not home and we were not ready! In the meantime of course I did copy from our Archdiocesan web site all the information about *"How to respond to a raid?"*

It is now Monday...and Paul has received my frantic phone calls concerning the **RUMOR**...We set 10: 30 as our time to meet to prepare our response.... I would come to Postville and in the meantime Paul would be going to the apartments of our Hispanic People telling them about their rights ...just in case there is a raid and how they are to keep silent etc. And I suppose telling them that we would get back to them...after we had met and prepared our response!!!!

At 10:03 I receive a phone call from Paul...his words are imbedded in my memory....
“**It’s no rumor...the helicopters are here.**” So much for our Plan!

I immediately left my desk in Monona and drove to Agriprocessors hoping that I might see some of our people...*what I thought I could do I do not know* ...I simply wanted our people to know that we cared about them and that the St. Bridget’s Faith Community was here for them. Did I see any of them? Of course not...all I saw were helicopters, ICE agents armed with guns, State Patrol Officers, Sheriff Cars, local police, journalists, cameras plus a number of very concerned and frightened Postville residents....After thirty minutes or so I approached our local Chief of Police and simply said, “*Mike, what we feared has happened. If you see any of our families tell them that St. Bridget’s is here for them and that they can come to the Church.*”

I then returned to St. Bridget’s. The first woman I met was a parishioner carrying a few dozen cookies...and some lemonade...and she said: “***Sister, a terrible thing has happened to our town.***” How prophetic were her words! A terrible thing did happen to the town of Postville on May 12, 2008 ...something we pray will never again happen to another group of people or town and **this is why we have to care be involved.**

I then opened the Church door and saw a group of ten or twelve women huddled together...with their children...praying. A small bi lingual boy prompted by his Spanish speaking mother approached me and said: “*Can our friends come too?*” My spontaneous response was: “*Of course they can ...tell anyone who is afraid or alone to come to St. Bridget’s.*”

Little did I know what those words would mean for by 7:00 that evening over 400 men, women and children were pouring into St. Bridget’s. They came to be with friends and family members. They came to see who was there and not there...they came to see who had or had not been detained. They came to cry together and pray together. They came to receive strength from one another. They were too afraid to be alone for fear that **ICE** officials might come to their home. They came trusting that the Church and the Postville community would guide and help them at this most horrible time in their lives. They came as hurting, frightened, traumatized human persons.....they came as persons with the same hopes and fears that all of us have **and this is why we should care and be involved!**

To be at St. Bridget’s on that Monday evening was to see humanity at its bestfor assistance in the form of food, blankets, pillows, toothbrushes, cots, games, toys was coming to us like manna from heaven. To be there was also to see what happens when the law of the land does not keep up with need of the land....when the law of the land does not provide a means for our 21st century immigrants, who come here for the same reasons that our ancestors came to America, does not provide a means for them to “*regularize their status in our country.*” We accept their labor ...we need their labor...but we do not accept their presence. Instead we call and treat them as criminals. The tragedy of Postville screams for our compassion, our attention and our involvement in immigration reform. **And this is why we should care and be involved.**

Permit me now to tell you the story of Pedro, a thirteen year old bilingual...sensitive... well educated member of our community. He approached me saying, "*Hi Sister Mary.*" "*Hi Pedro. How are you?*" His response: "**I am sad...very sad because they have taken away my mother.**" No thirteen year old boy should ever again have to experience such loss. No thirteen year old boy or girl should ever again have to experience such pain. No other child should be forced to say "*They have taken away my mother.*" **And this is why we should care and be involved!**

In mid July Pedro was at the dining room table in St. Bridget's Rectory...he was looking very somber sitting across from Violeta Aleman. Violeta, a staff person, was doing her best to respond to Pedro's question which was... "*Do you know what jail my mother is in.*" She was in Eldora ... had been moved to Kansas and now moved again. After a great deal of phone calling and internet searching Violeta found Pedro's mother. She was now in Tallahassee, Florida. Pedro breathed a sign of relief. He had found his mother and the family could call her.

I continued my visit with Pedro, asking what his father was going to do. Would he remain in Postville or would he take Pedro and his little sister, Samantha... back to Mexico. (Samantha by the way is a citizen of the U.S.) With sadness and disappointment in his eyes, he said: "*We are going back to Mexico.*" I then asked...*will you go to school?* "*No, the schools in Mexico aren't very good and I would only have one more year so I will go to work.* "And where will you work, Pedro?" "*I will work in the fields.*" My heart sank....**Pedro**, a gifted, young, intelligent...bi lingual person with the potential to be a leader will return to Mexico and work in the fields. What a loss for Pedro! What a loss for Samantha! What a loss for our country! What a disappointment for his parents who had risked their lives in order to work so that they could feed and educate their families. **And this is why we should care and be involved!** (Pedro, on Saturday...(Nov. 8, 2008) Pedro gave a testimony about his experience. These were his opening words: "**That day scarred my heart forever...**")

Other reasons for caring and being involved come directly from Scripture...from the **word of God**The **scripture** that gave me life, courage, energy and direction during the days following the raid came from the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Micah.

Leviticus: 19:34

In the Book of Leviticus we hear: "You should treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you, too, were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I the Lord am your God."

What is America but a country of immigrants? Are we not all brothers and sisters to one another? Did not all of our ancestors come to America for a better life? Did not our ancestors come to America to feed their families? Did they not come for the freedom that

America offers? Does not our Statue of Liberty say: “Give me your tired...your poor...your huddled masses yearning to be free...”
And this is why we should care and be involved!

Another Scripture passage that has given me courage comes from the Book of Micah:

This is what Yahweh asks of you...only this: To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

The word is clear ...the message is clear....and hundreds of people who offered their help in Postville either through their presence, legal, financial or counseling expertise or were present with us through the financial contribution that they made....lived this passage from the Book of Micah in a most authentic manner.

And this is why we should care and be involved...Our God calls us to involvement. Our God calls us to love. Our God calls us to respond to the needs of the poor. Our God calls us to act justly. Yes, ***this is what Yahweh asks of us...only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God.***

Then of course we have the **Book of James** with the famous passage: “*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*” (**James 2: 14-17**)

The message is clear. And this is why we should care and be involved...Our faith calls us to action. Our faith calls us to involvement!

In addition to faith my family heritage, in particular the words of my father gave me courage as I faced the initial days following our raid. My father served as District Attorney of Milwaukee County from 1944 until his death in 1964. In the fall of 1964 he was engaged in another election ...he was also engaged in a struggle with cancer. Just a few days before he died he spoke with our pastor, and said this, “*I want to die in office and go out with my head held high in vindication for the principles for which I have fought...I have tried to lend dignity to my office and as a public servant to defend the rights of the little people.*” These words stayed with me. These words motivated me especially when I was asked about helping “*illegal immigrants...and my support of those who broke the law...*” I was secure in doing what I was doing for I was doing what my father had taught me....I was defending the rights of the little people. **Yes, it is because of the little people that we should care and be involved.**

Now permit me to give you some **suggestions for action...some suggestions for involvement.**

1. **Do all in you power to work for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.**
Contact your congresspersons and legislators...ask that this issue come to the table...plead with them to identify ways to permit those who desire to call America home to have a legal path to citizenship.
2. While we call for Immigration Reform ...**plead, too, with our legislators for an end to raids**...Bishop Wester of Salt Lake City has made this statement: *“We have witnessed first hand the suffering of immigrant families and are gravely concerned about the collateral human consequences of immigration enforcement raids on the family unit....Raids strike immigrant communities unexpectedly, leaving the affected immigrant families to cope in the aftermath. Husbands are separated from their wives, and children are separated from their parents. Many families will never recover; others will never reunite...”* **I beg you... do what you can to call for an end to immigration raids.** (Stories shared with Rigoberta Menchu)
3. **Do as you are doing today....become educated about immigration related issues....**View Documentaries that help you to know and understand the plight of our immigrants and refugees such as the *Voice of a Mountain; Dying To Live; A Day without a Mexican; The Mountain Trembles and Strangers No Longer* etc.
4. **Stand in solidarity with our Hispanic brothers and sisters...become a welcoming community...get to know them...open your hearts to them...Let them know that you care...become a friend....** In the forward to a book entitled Border of Death, Valley of Life by Daniel Groody, CSC, Fr. Virgilio Elizondo states:

In the voice of the wounded stranger we hear the voice of God.....I heard the voice of God in the voices of the wounded people of Postville....I heard the voice of God in Pedro....I saw the face of God in the face of Maria del Refugio, who a week after the raid fled Postville and returned to Mexico with her two children, where she knew she would be poor and her children would not be able to be educated and they might be hungry but at least they would be accepted...I heard the voice of God in the anger of Rutilla who talked about the forms of abuse she experienced while working at Agriprocessors.

Because I had the privilege of walking with these wounded people...they are no longer strangers...they are friends. My hope is this ...may you in some way have the same privilege I had and may the voice of the wounded stranger soon become your wounded friend.

5. If possible contribute financially to faith communities struggling to respond to the financial needs of immigrant communities Just as a quick aside I would like to share a few lines from the letters we received from people across the country.....

These letters included financial donations but their words were powerful...we can learn from these people who cared and desired to be involved.... Hear is just a sample....

- Please accept this small donation for helping our mothers and sisters in need. We saw the story in the paper. We are all immigrants. In solidarity...
- Saw yesterday's N.Y. Times article. Your work is inspiring. God bless you and we'll pray that our country will become again the humane shelter for the poor and weak and helpless....
- Although I don't agree with people coming here illegally, there has to be a line drawn between people who are abusing the system or people who are simply victims of immigration policies and paperwork...
- How sad that this great country of ours cannot find a more humane solution to this problem. I was pleased to hear that your (my) Church has extended a helping hand and I would like to thank you for speaking up on their behalf as well as for providing generous assistance
- All I want to say really is...I keep you in my prayers and I want to stand up and be counted with all the others who are saying, "**NO...NO...NO**, this must not happen in the United States of America...treating people like this....
- My wife, a rabbi, visited Postville. They came away enormously disturbed by the actions of our government and, of course, by the behavior of Agriprocessors itself. But they came away inspired by the extraordinary work you are doing to support those who now find themselves without jobs, in danger of losing their housing and unsure of how they will feed their children
- Thank youit is people like you who will lift us to the next level of consciousness with an awareness that we are all from the one human family.

There was also another very memorable one that said, "**Give 'em hell...Sr. Mary**"

6. Finally Pray about and for the issue of immigration. During an interfaith Prayer and Rally held in Postville on July 27 we offered a common response to our Scripture verses.

The response was.... **Give us Courage....Give us Hope...Give us Love.** Since that day I have prayed that our legislators would have the **courage to bring the issue of comprehensive immigration reform to the table.** I have prayed that our **Hispanic brothers and sisters would never lose hope in the American Dream and that we as Americans would continue to offer hospitality to those in need.** I have prayed that all people might be filled with **love, a love so powerful and inclusive that it will bring about justice!**

**This is my prayer for you and these are my final wordsMay you have the
The Courage..... The Hope and The Love
To Care and To be Involved!**

Thank you.....

**Mary McCauley, BVM
November 9, 2009**