

Postville rally is display of ecumenism

By William Cullen
For The Witness

POSTVILLE — In a heartening demonstration of religious and social unity, advocates for comprehensive immigration reform flocked to Postville Sunday, July 27, for an interfaith service, march, and rally.

The organizers of the event were St. Bridget Parish, the Jewish Community Action of St. Paul, and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs of Chicago.

This outpouring of support was in response to the May 12 raid of the Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in Postville — the nation's largest producer of meat products processed according to observant Jewish dietary laws.

This was the largest immigration raid and detention in U.S. history. Armed agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE, part of the Department of Homeland Security), along with other federal and state agencies, entered Agriprocessors that morning and arrested and took away 389 immigrant workers, mostly of Mexican and Guatemalan origin, devastating the families involved.

"We stand in solidarity with you. We respect you and love you."

Archbishop Jerome Hanus

Within two weeks, courts had sent 270 to prison to serve five-month sentences; they will then be deported. A few others were allowed to return to their children, while remaining under house arrest, and fitted with electronic monitoring devices.

However, on this Sunday in Postville, an estimated 700 human rights advocates, many from the Jewish communities in Minneapolis, Chicago, Milwaukee and New York, joined others from the Midwest, squeezing into St. Bridget's Church for the interfaith religious service.

The uplifting ecumenical service featured songs, Scriptures, and remarks in English, Spanish, and Hebrew, from church/synagogue clergy and aid workers.

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM, pastoral administrator at St. Bridget's, began, "We stand in solidarity with those who were arrested on May 12 and with their families, and in solidarity with those workers who now live in fear around the United States. We call for reform, not raids."

Rabbi Alexander Davis from Minneapolis said he came in order "to witness first-hand the effects of the raid, because we care about justice."

Rev. Mark Anderson, assistant to the bishop for the Northeastern Iowa Lutheran Synod, cited both the sorrow of the raid and the blessing of the growing partnership of Lutherans, Catholics, and Jewish brethren. He also exhorted legislators to "fix this legislation to help all families."

Dubuque Archbishop Jerome Hanus, OSB, delivered his appeal in Spanish and



Hundreds of human rights advocates from around the country prayed in English, Spanish and Hebrew for worker justice, comprehensive immigration reform, and family unity at the peaceful ecumenical march and rally in Postville on July 27. (Photo Judy Callahan, BVM)

English, declaring, "May all of our legislators and government leaders have the courage to make comprehensive immigration reform a priority for the next legislative session. May all of us gathered here never lose hope in the American dream. We stand in solidarity with you. We respect you and love you."

After the interfaith service, participants swept onto Williams Street and joined hundreds already there for the orderly one-mile march to Agriprocessors. One local news source estimated there were 1,500 marchers, many carrying signs, "All religions believe in justice," "People need Jobs not Jail," "Todos Somos Uno," ("We are all one"). Frequent chants included, "Reform not raids!" "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" "Si se puede!" ("Yes, it can be done").

At the corner of Lawler and Williams Streets, a smaller group of counter-demonstrators gathered with signs and shouts, including "Save the American worker."

Local law enforcement kept both groups separate.

During the march local residents watched from their lawns and porches.

At the Agriprocessors plant "Now Hiring" signs indicated that jobs have not been filled since the May raid.

"We are especially disappointed that a plant producing kosher food has brought such pain to its workers."

*Vic Rosenthal,
Jewish Community Action*

The divisive national legislation cited by both sides, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, failed in the Senate last year. This legislation would have provided legal status and a path to citizen-

ship for the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants now residing in the U.S. It was endorsed by President Bush; however, critics who derided it as "amnesty for illegals" won the day. In the end, this legislation was stopped on June 28, 2007, as 37 Republican senators were joined by 15 Democrats and one Independent to defeat it. Both Iowa Senators, Grassley and Harkin, voted against it, while both presidential candidates, McCain and Obama, voted for it.

The day's final event was an outdoor rally which quickly moved inside St. Bridget's Church because of rain.

Vic Rosenthal, executive director of Jewish Community Action in St. Paul, urged everyone to seek worker justice. "We are especially disappointed that a plant producing kosher food has brought such pain to its workers," he exclaimed.

Jane Ramsey, executive director of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Chicago, explained that they had met with representatives from Agriprocessors and insisted that arrested employees be given back pay, vacation and other benefits due. These negotiations will continue.

Robert Penrod, Mayor of Postville, described the impact of the raid on workers and families who make up so much of the town and the school system, and he declared, "We need to put an end to the ICE raids, once and for all!"

"I thank your mayor for his support of our people in this town," said Miguel Anjar-Ibarro, vice-minister of Guatemalan Affairs, Consulate General in Chicago.

Two former Agriprocessors employees still under house arrest, spoke. Both women wore monitoring shackles around their ankles. Cruz Rodriguez urged all, "Stand together for our families, be a voice for those who cannot speak, who are detained," and she implored, "Remain with us through this process."

Maria L. Gomez described the post-raid suffering of her family, of her sister's detention and trips with her nephew to visit his mother in prison.

Young Pedro Lopez, whose mother has been detained in prison, spoke movingly of his loss.

Gideon Aronoff of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in New York, Rev. David Vasquez, Luther College campus pastor, and Rev. L. Paul Ouderkerk, spoke passionately about the humanitarian toll of the raid.

"The raid at Agriprocessors should not have happened," stated Aronoff. "The President and Congress failed their responsibility to fix our broken immigration system."

Rev. Vasquez cited "immigrants" mentioned in Scripture — Abraham and Sarah, and the Holy Family. He added, "Even Mohammed. All were immigrants."

Postville businessman Elmer Herrera summed up the day's message with his perspective, "All religion is love."

“This is a call for justice, a call to be faithful to our American and religious values.”

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM



Photos by:
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(See more photos at
www.arch.pvt.k12.ia.us/witness)



Message of Archbishop Hanus at the prayer service at Postville

At the end of each one of our Scripture verses this afternoon we spoke these words:

Give us Courage... Give us Hope ...Give us Love.

May all of our legislators and government leaders have the **COURAGE** to make **Comprehensive Immigration Reform** a priority for the next legislative session. In addition to bringing change to our current immigration policy, may they have the **COURAGE** to address the many other issues related to it, such as, the need for labor within our own country and the poverty experienced by many in neighboring lands.

May all of us gathered for this prayer and walk this afternoon never lose **HOPE** in the **American Dream**. May we, who have been given citizenship within the United States through our immigrant ancestors, carry on their spirit by opening our hearts and our land to those in the 21st century, who also desire to call America home. May a legal path to citizenship, one that respects the rights of the worker and the unity of the family, be a viable option for those in need.

May all in Postville who were affected by the immigration raid on May 12, whether you are present in this assembly this afternoon, are in a jail somewhere in the United States or have already been deported to your home country, may you know that we stand in solidarity with you. We identify with your pain. We experience your disappointment. We respect you and we **LOVE** you.

Finally, may our religious and social response to this critical issue of immigration be one that is rooted in the Judeo Christian Scriptures. May we welcome the stranger among us, treat the alien with respect and charity, and provide pastoral and humanitarian assistance wherever needed. O God we pray....

Give us Courage... Give us Hope ...Give us Love



Postville mayor, Robert Penrod, speaks at the rally as Jane Ramsey, director of Jewish Council on Urban Affairs and Rev. Mark Anderson, assistant to the bishop for the Northeast Iowa Lutheran Synod of Waverly, ponder his remarks.