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Cardinal, others discuss faith-based forces aligning on immigration

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IMMIGRATION-MAHONY (UPDATED) Sep-22-2009 (800 words) xxxn

Cardinal, others discuss faith-based forces aligning on immigration

Editors: Updates with new material after 13th paragraph. UPDATED version of IMMIGRATION-MAHONY of Sept. 22, 2009:

By Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The next phase in the drive for comprehensive immigration reform is taking root in parish basements, church sanctuaries and Jewish summer camps.

At a Sept. 22 panel discussion sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a Washington research institute, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony was joined by a rabbi, a Methodist minister and the author of a new report on religious activism for immigration to discuss the direction taken over the last few years.

The report, "Loving Thy Neighbor," tells the stories of work for immigrants and immigration reform such as the interfaith efforts that developed in tiny Postville, Iowa, after the May 2008 workplace raid on Agriprocessors, a kosher meatpacking plant. St. Bridget Church joined forces with local Lutheran and Jewish congregations and their national networks to provide basic services and then more advanced assistance in Postville.

Other stories in the report tell about cooking lessons being given by Iraqi refugees in Lancaster, Pa., to thank those who had assisted them; an immigrant detention center near Chicago where two nuns started a prayer ministry; and a 143-mile pilgrimage to where immigrants facing deportation were detained, organized by two Catholics in Washington state.

Against that backdrop, Cardinal Mahony and the Rev. Dean Reed, pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Stephenville, Texas, told of being jolted into action on behalf of a broad approach to immigration reform.

For Rev. Reed, the jolt came from the realization that the Mexican migrants in his town outside of Fort Worth were going through the same kind of adjustments as did his Irish immigrant ancestors long ago.

As a resident of an overwhelmingly conservative county, Rev. Reed said he's satisfied with working gradually within the minority of people in the community who are sympathetic to immigrants, encouraging them to talk to others and working to open people's hearts.

Cardinal Mahony said the initially quiet passage in the House in 2005 of a sweeping immigration bill introduced by Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., caught him off guard. The bill called for a wide range of immigration enforcement measures, including making it illegal to provide humanitarian assistance to people in the country illegally.

"I said, 'You've got to be kidding,'" said Cardinal Mahony. Soon after, he wrote a column in

which he said if the bill became law, he would advise his priests to ignore provisions that would have criminalized the act of giving food or other assistance to undocumented immigrants.

Ultimately, Cardinal Mahony said he came to consider "that bill was a godsend. It made so absurd how they wanted to deal with the issue."

Anger over that bill helped mobilize millions of people at pro-immigrant rallies around the country in the spring of 2006. Though efforts to pass broader immigration legislation failed that year and the year after, broad alliances and grass-roots organizations have continued their work.

Cardinal Mahony said he later told Sensenbrenner that he had done the movement for comprehensive immigration reform a favor.

"I told him, 'Thank you for giving us such an absurd piece of legislation.' It energized the immigrant and pro-immigrant community."

Rabbi Jack Moline, director of public policy for the Rabbinical Assembly and head of the Agudas Achim Congregation in Alexandria, Va., said the Postville raid had a huge impact on the whole Jewish community. People learned that part of the reason they were able to enjoy kosher foods in supermarkets around the country was "through the exploitation of workers."

The response was not only to provide support to the families in Postville that struggled to deal with deportations, separations and closed businesses, but to evaluate the nature of kosher certification, said Rabbi Moline.

The result has been the drafting of a new "justice certification," which would provide standards for treatment of employees, animal welfare, consumer issues, corporate integrity and environmental impact, on top of kosher requirements for food production.

During his day in Washington, Cardinal Mahony also met with Homeland Security director Janet Napolitano and with members of the White House staff.

After the round-table discussion, Cardinal Mahony told Catholic News Service that Napolitano affirmed that she and President Barack Obama are committed to pushing for comprehensive immigration reform after the current health care legislative battle is resolved.

That effort should begin late this fall or early next year. "Timing is critical," he said, because few in Congress will be willing to take up immigration reform too close to the election.

But, as he told the round table, "kicking the can down the road" and delaying taking up immigration legislation is not only irresponsible, it's not really a viable option as the economy improves, more baby boomers retire and demand for labor increases.

"After you kick the can a few times it becomes so dented it won't go very far," he said.

END

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