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# Central College, Pella, Iowa, October 21, 2009

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**Central College  
Pella, Iowa  
October 21, 2009**

I first of all would like to take this opportunity to thank you for participating in this special two day program on immigration. I am honored to be with you and am grateful to be able to share a bit about what I have come to call “**The Postville Story.**”

Some of your other presenters and panelists will be focusing on specific legal or advocacy issues related to immigration; **whereas my focus will be to tell you about the devastating raid that took place in Postville, Iowa on May 12, 2008.....**

- I will help you to know some of the people directly affected by the raid....
- I will share with you how we handled both the criticism and support that came our way as we responded to our immigrant families and ...
- I will close with an invitation to you to join me in an effort to bring about comprehensive immigration reform.

**The Postville Story** is a story of a long and difficult journey. It is a story of a group of people from Mexico and Guatemala who left their native countries in order to feed their families, educate their children, provide medicine for seriously ill parents and/or children, and ultimately bring life, healing, wholeness and meaning to people they loved.

**The Postville Story** is a story of hope and love; of disappointment and fear; of imprisonment and waiting; of courage and compassion. It is a story of a journey that began in hope and ended in tragedy. **However I can only hope that the journey that appeared to end in tragedy on May 12, 2008 will possibly...just possibly...end in transformation.** My deepest hope is that the tragedy of Postville will serve as the impetus for comprehensive immigration reform. Because of people like you I remain confident that this tragic and heartbreaking story will be transformative.

So that you might understand the tragedy and the hope that fills my heart I invite you to step back in time with me not to May 12, 2008, but to May 9, 2008. Picture this. I am in my office in Monona, Iowa, completing preparations for the weekend liturgies. My week is winding down. The phone rings. It is a call from Carlos Rios, a person in Des Moines who works with issues of immigration. Carlos asks, “*Have you heard the rumor?*” I ask, “*What rumor?*” “*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 presence of representatives from the Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement at the Cattle Congress in Waterloo.*” And in my mind and heart I’m hoping against hope that Postville would not be the target. He asks me where Paul Rael, our Hispanic Minister, is as he could not locate him. Much to my dismay Paul is away for a three day weekend. Without trying to scare me half out of my wits Carlos says, “***This is very serious.***”

I hang up the phone and think ...what do I do? I also think oh why ...oh why does Paul, my right hand person, have to be away this weekend...and he isn't just in Cedar Rapids or Waterloo but he is in Western Iowa. Needless to say an immediate call is made to his home and office asking him to contact me as soon as he returns. On Saturday morning I receive another call...this time from Tony Leys, a reporter from the Des Moines Register, "*Had I heard the rumor?*" By then I am convinced that Postville is the target but surely it will not be until later on in the week. After all Paul is not home and we are not ready!

On Monday Paul is home and has received my frantic phone calls concerning the **RUMOR**. We set 10:30 as our time to meet to prepare our response. I will go to Postville and in the meantime Paul will go to the apartments of our Hispanic People telling them about their rights, just in case there is a raid. And I suppose telling them that we will get back to them...after we have 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 planned response!

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.

I am told that had I been inside the plant I would have heard people shouting, "*La Migra! La Migra! Immigration, save yourself, if you can!*" Some ran. Some tried to hide. Others stood paralyzed and followed the harsh directives of ICE. They heard themselves called "rats." They were searched, shackled on their wrists, ankles and waist, lined up and tied to fences. Fear and anguish pervaded their minds and hearts. They had to be thinking....*Will I ever again see my children or spouse? And what will happen to my family now that I will not be able to provide money for food, rent or medical bills?*

Also had I been inside the plant I would have seen '**Elena**' grab her cell phone; call our Hispanic minister, Paul Rael, in whom they had great confidence, and with a quivering voice simply say, "**Take care of my children.**"

After thirty minutes or so of standing outside the plant I approached our local Chief of Police and 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.

I then opened the Church door and saw a group of ten or twelve women huddled together with their children. 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.

To be at St. Bridget’s on that Monday evening was to see humanity at its best ...for 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

**Permit me now to tell you a few stories of the people I came to know, respect and love.** I do this because our 21<sup>st</sup> century immigrants cannot remain faceless and nameless. We need to call them by name, we need to know them and become familiar with their stories. I also believe that the first step in changing a law is to transform hearts. And in order for hearts to be transformed we have to know and appreciate the people who are currently being prevented from becoming documented persons.

The first person I want you to know is **Pedro**.... (*It is possible that you have read about him so maybe you know him.*) At the time of the raid Pedro was twelve. He came to Postville when he was about three with his mother, father and older sister. Within a few years a younger sister, Samantha, would be born as would a little nephew. On the Thursday following the raid I met **Pedro. I simply said: Pedro, How Are You? He responded by saying, “I am sad, very sad because they have taken away my mother.”** No child should have to use these words or feel these feelings.

**On Saturday November 8,** Pedro was one of the persons who offered testimony to Rigoberta Menchu, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Guatemala. She had come to listen to her people and to hear their stories. Her hope was to bring national and international awareness to the injustices endured by the people of Postville. Pedro opened his witness statement concerning May 12, 2008, the day of the raid, with these words: “**That day scarred my heart forever...**”

To scar...to leave an indelible mark...this is what happened to Pedro's heart and this is what happened to the hearts of everyone involved in the raid. We cannot permit such scars to mark the hearts of more people. We cannot permit other small rural towns to be scared and devastated as was the town of Postville.

I would also like you to know **42 men and three women who following the raid walked the streets of Postville with GPS devices on their ankles.** These women and 3 men were arrested on the day of the raid but were released with electronic tracking devices so that they could care for their children. They were not able to work and were totally dependent on charity in order to feed and care for their family. Each week they would come to St. Bridget's... often with tears in their eyes... and ask to have their rent, utility, phone or medical bills paid. They did not want to ask for charity. They wanted to work.

On the days immediately following the raid these women were so embarrassed and humiliated that they did not want anyone to see that they had a bracelet on their ankle...they would pull their slacks down so no one could see...but on the Sunday following the raid when we joined many other concerned people for a prayer and walk in Waterloo... they rolled their slacks up ....stood tall and carried signs that read: **We are not criminals...We came to work...We came to feed our families...We are mothers.** I call these women the "Rosa Parks" of our broken immigration system.

**One woman with an ankle bracelet** told the story of her little daughter who looked at her leg and said, "*Mommy, what did you do?*" No mother should have to look her child in the eye and try to explain to her daughter that her mother and father loved her so much...that they came to the United States, yes without the proper papers, but because they felt they had no other choice and they wanted her to have a better future. And now because of that act...because of their love...her mother is being treated as a criminal.

[\(The last eleven women with ankle bracelets had their GPS devices removed in December 2009...eighteen months after their arrest.\)](#)

I would also like you to know "**Gloria**", a woman from Mexico. She is tall and dignified. During the past summer she, too, walked the streets of Postville with a monitoring device on her ankle. She also walked the streets with pain and anger in her heart. Her anger stemmed from the labor law abuses, injustices and sexual harassment that she and others alleged they experienced while working at Agriprocessors.

On July 26, 2008 the day that three United States Congresspersons came to Postville to listen to the testimony of our people, she spoke spontaneously. I had seen her early in the morning in Church in front of a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe ...tears streaming down her face. At that moment I knew I was looking at a woman in intense need...in intense pain and with intense courage.

Within an hour or two that pain, need and courage would turn to words and shouts of honest anger...as she vividly described the abuses that our people, especially the women and the minors had endured while working at Agriprocessors. She reminded me of the

story of Hannah in the Old Testament who poured out her heart to her God and to her people.

Just as Hannah's prayer was prompted by her deep sorrow and misery, I believe that "Gloria's" plea was prompted by the hurt, the pain, the humiliation and shattered dreams experienced by so many in Postville. She was not speaking just for herself...she was speaking for an entire community who had come to Postville with the hope of a better future. **They knew they had come without the proper documentation....but for survival they did not know what else to do.** On behalf of Gloria and all whom she represented in her agonizing prayer and plea to the Congresspersons I beg you to be attentive to the pain and the tears of our Postville People. I beg you to engage in efforts aimed at comprehensive immigration reform.

I have another story. It is the story of **Je sus**. The first day I met **Je sus** was the day that Rigoberta Menchu visited Postville. He was going to offer a testimony describing his experience of the raid and then his five months in jail. His story was difficult to listen to for he spoke of the harsh treatment he received from the ICE officials...of how he was kicked to the ground and beaten...of how they were often called rats...made fun of, shackled and searched, the latter causing great humiliation every time he was moved from one jail to another and for **Je sus** this happened about four or five times.

He described the anguish in his heart when he feared he would never again see his wife or three month old daughter. He told about being in solitary confinement for ten to twelve days. He told about sharing a jail cell with hardened criminals, with murderers, burglars, rapists. He found this very hard for he knew the only crime he ever committed was to work without proper documentation. **He loved his wife and his daughter so much that he was willing to risk his life so his wife and child could have a better future.**

I have another story that is simple and short, yet poignant. It is about "**Carlos,**" a man who spent the summer in a Florida jail. This man was from Guatemala. He had come to Postville so that he could send money back to his wife and children who had remained in Guatemala... and this is what he faithfully did every single month.

Naturally when he was arrested and jailed he was no longer able to support his family. Finally toward the end of his jail sentence he was able to talk to his wife in Guatemala....According to the interviewer his wife told him that she did not have any money and his children were hungry. This is the advice he gave to his wife.... "***Sell whatever we have in order to feed the children.***"

And now for one final story! It is simple and short, yet poignant. It is the story of “**Isaias.**” Isaias Perez Martinez is a man who walked from Guatemala to the US. He was arrested on the day of the raid and a day or two after sat in front of a lawyer and an interpreter as they tried to explain the meaning of a plea agreement to him. Dr. Eric, the interpreter, told me that Isaias cried for three hours straight...he was worried sick about his wife, his children, his sister and mother, all depending on him back in Guatemala. Finally when he was able to stop sobbing he looked at the lawyer and Dr. Eric and said: “**God knows you are just doing your job so you can feed your families; and your job is to keep me from feeding mine.**”

There are so many heartaches connected with the Postville story....one has to do with the circumstances that forced them to come to the United States in the first place....another has to do with the way some were treated when they got here....another with the way they were treated at Agriprocessors, another with the alleged abuses they experienced during the raid (physical, verbal and mental); another about the abuses during the pre-court detention in Waterloo and how they were forced into their plea agreements. **All of their stories are stories of people seeking wholeness...seeking life....seeking justice....seeking understanding...seeking equality.**

Permit me now to make a few comments on both the support and the criticism we received for responding the way we did to the needs of our immigrant community.

**First of all the support.** This support came in the form of people. What did they do? They brought food...prepared meals...served meals...cleaned bathrooms...played with the children...doctors and nurses set up a free medical clinic...counselors came...immigration lawyers and non immigration lawyers came to offer help...personnel from Catholic Charities and Lutheran services were present...people provided transportation... And as you may or may not know many sent financial aid. They could not be there in person but wanted to offer their support. We have received over \$1,200,000 from people across the country...from 49 of our 50 states ....and with each donation came a beautiful note....I'll read a couple...

- Please accept this small donation for helping our mothers and sisters in need. **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 once again become the humane shelter for the poor and weak and helpless....**
- 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....

The people who sent these notes and supported us financially responded to the needs of our Hispanic brothers and sisters in a most authentic and generous manner. They supported us in time of great need and will not be forgotten.

I also received notes that were highly critical of the fact that we were assisting people who were here in the United States without proper documentation...they of course always referred to our people as “illegals.” People tried to warn me that I could be in serious trouble for “harboring illegals.”

In all honesty I was never afraid ...I never second guessed myself nor did anyone else on our staff for we were doing what we knew was right. We were responding to people who were traumatized and terrorized, and we were doing our best to comfort, encourage and empower them. We were giving them a safe haven when our government...because of our flawed and outdated immigration system...was treating them as criminals.

I was often asked the question...especially by news reporters.... ***Do you support people who break the law?*** My response would be....I do not support the breaking of a law but I wholeheartedly support reviewing a law when it is not in accord with the values of our country or it is no longer meeting the need of the day, for I knew that there is a law within our human heart, the law of love and the law of justice, that at all times must direct our thoughts, words and actions. **These convictions came from my family and my faith.**

I'd like to share a little story about my family heritage. 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 came to my mind during the days following the raid. They stayed with me, gave me courage and 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.**

A number of passages from Scripture also gave me courage and direction during these extremely challenging days. In particular a verse from Psalm 105, ***“Look to God and his strength...seek to serve him constantly,”*** was always on my lips and in my heart. What else could we do? There was no blueprint to follow for a response to the needs of 389 people, their families and friends who had been arrested in one of the largest, gravely insensitive, unjust and harsh raids that had occurred to date in the history of the United States. There was only one thing to do. We had to follow our hearts: trust the presence of our God and be confident that we would be given the wisdom and courage we needed at each moment of our day in order to *“defend the rights of the little people.”* We also knew



how important it was to remain calm, to maintain a sense of humor, to be flexible and to work collaboratively with others.

Other Scripture passages that gave us courage were from the **Book of Leviticus and the Book of Micah. Some of you may be familiar with these verses.** In Leviticus (19:34) 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.”*

And in the **Book of Micah we are directed by the words:**

***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)***

Many times during the summer as various families were leaving Postville I would be there as they boarded the bus for O’Hare to say good bye. I would hug them and say: *“I am so sorry for the way that our country has treated you...I am so sorry for what happened to you at Agriprocessors. I am so sorry that you have to leave.”* They would look at me, shrug their shoulders and say, *“It’s ok...we understand!”* But I say ***“It’s not ok...We have to care....we have to act....We have to work for comprehensive immigration reform.”*** **Now is the time to do just that.**

In late August I had the privilege of receiving the **Cristine Wilson Medal for Equality and Justice** from the *Iowa Commission on the Status of Women*. In receiving it I told the assembled group that I did not feel that I deserved it, but that I would receive it in the name of the 389 people and their families who had been directly affected by the raid. I would receive it in the name of all the people who had come to our assistance. I was only the representative for innumerable people who were working for justice and equality.

In my response to this honor I quoted a scripture verse that to me expressed all that I was feeling about receiving a medal for equality and justice. The verse I used is from the Gospel of Luke and reads:

*“So with you: when you have done all you have been told to do ...say,  
“We are unworthy servants, we have done no more than our duty.” (Lk. 17:10)*

Truly this is how I felt. I was an unworthy servant doing no more than my duty. I was offering pastoral presence and support to traumatized, frightened and hurting people.

Today I invite you to join me ***in doing our duty***. I invite you to say with me, *“We are unworthy servants; we are doing no more than our duty.”* It is our duty to help people in need. It is our duty to empower people. It is our duty to free people. It is our duty to offer a word of hope, a word of consolation and a word of justice to critical human situations. It is our duty to seek equality and justice for all people, *especially the poor, the traumatized*

*and those held captive by the circumstances of their lives.* It is our duty to share our gifts, whatever those gifts might be with people in need.

I continue to describe May 12, 2008, *as the most challenging, exhausting, privileged and transformative day of my forty-five years of ministry.* I also call it a gift because since that fateful day I am much more inclined to speak out about injustices.

I would like to close with a brief reflection on a passage from the **Acts of the Apostles**...Some of you may or may not be familiar with it. It is the story of Peter and John going into the temple area for the three o'clock hour of prayer. While there they encounter a man crippled from birth, who in accord with his custom was asking for alms. Peter saw the man. He heard his request and said,

***“I have neither silver nor gold but what I have I will give you....  
In the name of Jesus Christ rise and walk!”***

Peter took the cripple by the hand.... The man leaped up, went into the temple with them **....walking...jumping and praising God!**

The people were amazed. They were quite impressed, hence Peter went on to teach the people about how Jesus had died and then rose from the dead. And many people who heard the **WORD** that day came to believe.

Needless to say such teaching caused the elders and the Sadducees great consternation. They were perplexed. They did not know how to handle Peter and John because they were teaching them about Jesus. Their actions and their words were stirring up the people. **So.....** they conferred among themselves and came to the conclusion that the only way to dilute the power and the presence of Peter and John was to give them a very stern warning.....and hopefully get them out of town before too many more hearts were changed.

They looked directly at Peter and John and gave them this warning.

**“Never again are you to speak to anyone in the name of Jesus!”**

Peter and John heard their rebuke and responded,

**“It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.”**

Because of what happened in Postville on May 12, 2008 and has happened in innumerable other towns throughout the United States, with **Peter and John** I stand before you and say:

***It is impossible for me not to speak about what I have seen and heard!***

- I am impelled to speak about the needs and the fears ...the hopes and the desires of our immigrant brothers and sisters.
- I am impelled to tell the **“Postville story”** ...to tell the story about the pain, the anguish and the suffering of so many people whom I now call friend.

- I am impelled to speak about the underlying causes of migration.
- I am impelled to speak about the alleged injustices that many of our people, especially our women and minors experienced while working at Agriprocessors.
- I am impelled to speak about the devastating affects of a raid on people and on a town.
- I am impelled to speak of the men in jail who lived day in and day out with the gnawing question in their heart: *What will happen to my family now that I am not able to provide money for food and other living expenses?*
- I am impelled to speak about the complexity of our current immigration system; and its need for reform.
- I am impelled to tell you the story of **Pedro and Gloria and Jose and Je sus and Isaias** and so many others of my friends who came to the United States in order to feed their families.

I came here today to offer to you an invitation. My invitation is simple. I invite you to join me in **speaking a word of justice...a word of consolation....and a word of hope.**

Please join me in speaking the truth to our **President, Senators and Congresspersons.** Write them, call them, and speak directly to them informing them of the pain of Postville and the need for comprehensive immigration reform. Plead with them to review this complex issue and to develop humane legislation that addresses the root cause of immigration, as well as our current procedures for immigration. **How I would love it if Central College would become known as a College committed to focusing on comprehensive immigration reform.**

**Yes, my hope is this .....that we might be imbued with the boldness of Peter and John** so that

- **When we see injustice.....** may we speak out!
- **When the poor and the helpless are deprived of their rights .....**may we speak out!
- **When children wake up with night mares because they fear that their mother or their father will be taken away.....** may we speak out!
- **When hard working and needy people are exploited and disrespected in the workplace.....** may we speak out!
- **When families are broken apart and towns destroyed.....**may we speak out!

Yes, may we speak out and may the words we speak be **so strong.....so clear...so compassionate...so authentic...so just.....that hearts will be transformed and laws revised**. Then when that day comes and I believe it will .....**may we come to know and believe that the tragedy of Postville did serve as the impetus for comprehensive immigration reform**.

**Thank you,**

**Mary McCauley, BVM  
October 21, 2009**