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Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2010, Washington, DC, March 19-22, 2010

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**Ecumenical Advocacy Days2010
Washington, DC
March 19-22, 2010**

What an honor it is for me to be with you sharing what I have come to call the **Postville Story**. As I stand here, I carry within my heart the 389 men and women who were arrested, as well as everyone else affected by the immigration raid that took place at Agriprocessors, the kosher meat packing plant in Postville, Iowa on May 12, 2008.

The sharing of a story can have a profound affect on our lives. Stories shape our lives. Stories inspire. Stories bring to life our deepest held values and commitments. Stories inform. **Stories have the potential to transform.**

My deepest hope is that the **Postville Story** will have the power, **not only to transform hearts, but ultimately to transform our current immigration laws.**

A passage in the Book of Revelation points us in this direction.

*Whoever has ears ought to listen to what the Spirit
is saying to the Churches.* (Rev. 3: 22)

My firm conviction is that the Spirit is speaking to us through the **Postville Story, as well as through countless other heartbreaking stories of our immigrant brothers and sisters.**

The Postville Story is the story of a long and difficult journey of people from Mexico and Guatemala, who left their countries in order to feed their families, educate their children, provide medicine for seriously ill parents and/or children, and ultimately bring life and wholeness 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 tells of a journey that began in hope and ended in tragedy. **My hope** is that the journey that seemed to end in tragedy will lead to **transformation.**

A few days before the raid we heard rumors that there would be one at Agriprocessors. At 10:03 on Monday, May 12, 2008 I received a phone call from our St. Bridget Hispanic Minister. His words are imbedded in my memory.

“It’s no rumor...the helicopters are here.”

I immediately left my desk at St. Patrick’s in Monona, one of the other parishes I served and drove 15 miles to Agriprocessors. *What I thought I could do I do not know.* I simply wanted the 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, plus a number of very concerned and frightened Postville residents.

I was 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?*

After an hour of standing outside the plant I returned to **St. Bridget’s Church** to discover a group of women huddled together with their children. A young boy 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. 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 had or had not been detained. They were too afraid to be alone for fear that **ICE** officials might come to their homes. They came trusting that the Church and the Postville Community would guide and help them at this most horrible time in their lives.

Despite the trauma of the day, to be at St. Bridget’s on that Monday evening was to see humanity at its best: people bringing food, blankets, pillows, games, toothbrushes. **To be there was also to see what happens when the law of the land does not provide a means for our 21st century immigrants, 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.

To understand the horror and the power of the **Postville Story** it helps to know the people. The first person I’d like you to know is **Pedro**, who was 12 at the time of the raid. On the Thursday following the raid I met him and said: “**Pedro, How are you?**” He responded, “**I am sad, very sad because they have taken away my mother.**” This is the same child who described the day of the raid with these words: “*That day scarred my heart forever!*”

I’d also like you to be aware of the **42 women and 3 men who following the raid walked the streets of Postville with GPS devices on their ankles.**

They 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 families. Each week they came to St. Bridget’s... often with tears in their eyes... and asked 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 tracking devices on their ankles. 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, where the interrogations had taken place, ... 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**es” of our broken immigration system.

Another story is that of a young man named **Je sus**, whom I first met the day that Rigoberta Menchu visited Postville. He offered testimony describing his experience of the raid and his five months in jail. It was difficult to listen to him tell 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.

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 murderers, burglars, rapists. He found this very hard for he knew his only offense was to work without proper documentation.

Another story is **Rosanna and her two year old daughter, Estefana, who was born in the United States.** Rosanna described the raid this way:

*“They pointed a gun at me....they told me not to move.
I cried and thought of my daughter...wondering what would happen to her.”*

In order to care for her daughter Rosanna was released with an ankle bracelet, then deported to Guatemala. In a brief film made a year after the raid she sadly notes: “*Since returning to Guatemala I see how my daughter has stopped growing. I had no way to get money so I had to stop giving her milk.*”

Another story is **Isaias**’. **Isaias** 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. Erik, 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. Erik 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.***”

Recently I saw a play about the **Postville Raid** performed by six men who were arrested, served their five months in jail and then were required to remain in the Postville area to serve as witnesses at forthcoming trials. After the play a woman asked:

What advice would you give to other Guatemalan people who desire to come to the United States in order to make enough money to feed their families or to build a house or to pay for medical bills?

A twenty-one year old single man replied: *“I would tell them not to come. It is too dangerous...too risky and I would never want any one of my friends or family members to experience the pain and humiliation that I experienced in the United States.”*

Other immigrants (especially those with families) have responded differently. They say, *“Conditions in our home country are so bad....there is so much poverty that I would tell them to risk it and to come. When your children are starving you have to do whatever you can to help them to live.”*

*What is the Spirit is saying to the Churches?
Do we have ears to hear? Do we have the courage to act?*

These stories illustrate only some of the layers of heartaches connected with the **Postville Story....**

- one heartache has to do with the circumstances that forced them to come to the United States in the first place;
- another involves 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 with the original charge of aggravated identity theft, a felony that they did not understand;
- another with the abuses during the pre-court detention in Waterloo and how they were forced into their plea agreements;
- and another with the dropping of the immigration charges against Sholom Rubashkin, the manager of Agriprocessors, hence preventing the witnesses to tell their story in a court of law.

All their stories are stories of people seeking wholeness...seeking life....seeking justice....seeking equality. All of their stories are sacred....all of their stories have the power to transform.

While **Pedro and Isaias, Jesus and Rosanna** were living their stories we who were responding to those affected by the raid were living our story. We received both **support and criticism**. The support came in the form of people. They brought food, prepared meals, played with the children....doctors, nurses, counselors, teachers and lawyers came to offer help and many sent financial aid.

We also received criticism. People tried to warn me that I could be in serious trouble for “*harboring illegals.*” In all honesty I was never afraidI 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. We were trying to give them a safe haven when our government...**because of our flawed and outdated immigration system**...was treating them as criminals.

News reporters often asked: ***Do you support the breaking of a law?*** My response was and continues to 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 the law of love and justice deep within the human heart must at all times direct our thoughts, words and actions. My response was rooted in my own story.

My father served as District Attorney of Milwaukee County from 1944 until his death in 1964. A few days before he died he spoke with our pastor and said:

“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 and gave me courage, especially when I was asked about helping “*illegal immigrants...and my support of people who broke the law...*” **I was secure in acting the way I did 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 us courage and direction. In particular a verse from Psalm 105, “***Look to God’s strength...seek to serve God constantly,***” was always on our lips and in our hearts. 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 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 in order to “***defend the rights of the little people.***”

As the days and weeks progressed we were also very aware of the words in **Deuteronomy. (Dt. 24:14)**

*“Never exploit a poor and needy wage-earner,
whether one of your community or a foreign resident living in your town.”*

Many of the people who came to Postville in search of a better life were in fact exploited. One woman reflected:

*My name is **Elida**...I am from Guatemala...I have two children...We came here to make a living. We came to work...but when we worked they exploited us. We did not have an option....we could not complain because we needed the money....They need the work of our hands and then they do this to us.....*

Exploitation emerges repeatedly in the immigrants' story. For example in the documentary film entitled: **Guatemala: A Tale of Two Villages**....we hear the story of man **arrested on his very first day of work at Agriprocessors, charged with identity theft, jailed and deported**. Reflecting on his experience he said:

***This is a sad story. It never ends.
You can never forget the day they catch you. When you return home with your family
more in debt than when you left you feel you have failed!***

I can't help but ask: *"Has he failed or have we failed?"*

I started this presentation by saying that stories shape our lives.....that stories bring to life our deepest held values and beliefs.... **that stories have the potential to transform**. We cannot permit the **Postville Story** or any other story about our struggling immigrant brothers and sisters to become mere footnotes in our history books; rather they must become dynamic forces for change.

**We who have ears to hear.....
let us listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.**

Thank you....

Mary McCauley, BVM

March 20, 2010