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Archbishop attends Postville Mass

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POSTVILLE - During times of trouble, a flock finds solace in its shepherd.

Archbishop Jerome Hanus of the Archdiocese of Dubuque offered words of comfort and hope during a Saturday evening Mass at St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville.

The church, which runs a Hispanic ministry, has served as a place of refuge for families affected by a Monday raid at Agriprocessors, a Postville meat processing plant.

Authorities arrested nearly 400 workers, most from Guatemala, as they investigated alleged cases of identity theft, use of stolen Social Security cards and illegal entrance into the country.

Hanus presided over the bilingual Mass, speaking primarily in Spanish. The Archbishop looked to the words of Pope Benedict XVI and also the Scripture as he spoke of the immigrant's plight and place in God's family.

"There is no legal or illegal to God," Hanus said in Spanish.

Pope Benedict instructed bishops to welcome immigrants into their ranks and to help them flourish in their new home, Hanus said.

"These are people whom America has made her own," he said, quoting the pope.

The archbishop's presence at St. Bridget's on Saturday reinforces the Church's support of the families of detainees and the needs of immigrants, Catholics said.

"To have the bishop come, it doesn't happen an awful lot," said parishioner Mike Erickson. "It's a big deal."

Throughout the week, St. Bridget's has served as a place of information. Some Latinos stopped to check lists of detainees at the church entrance.

A man who identified himself as an illegal worker at Agriprocessors said he attended the Mass to find out how his detained compatriots were being treated. He did not want to be identified by name, but said the Archbishop's presence gave him reassurance.

"It gives us a little bit of tranquility, of peace," he said in Spanish.

Catholics traveled up from Waterloo for Saturday's Mass and Sisters with the Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary came from Dubuque to show support for Postville Latinos affected by the raid. Northeast Iowa churches from a variety of denominations and community members have donated food, clothing, money and toiletries.
"It's very nice," said Patrick Malanaphy, a deacon at St. Bridget's. "Community spirit and social justice."

Sister Eileen Healy of Dubuque said people should come first.

"If we're supposed to be Christians, then we live by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of Christ, then we're supposed to follow that, not just the law," she said.

Numerous Latino families, other parishioners of St. Bridget's, visiting Catholics and members of the media packed the 285-seat parish on Saturday. Families also occupied rows of folding chairs in the back of the church.

Others exchanged hugs. Several wiped away tears as they knelt in prayer.

Reminders of Monday's raid lingered in the church.

Children colored pictures prior to the service. Piles of folded clothing lined tables in the fellowship hall and in the restroom. Handmade signs posted outside the church expressed support for detainees.

During the Mass, readings, prayers and songs were offered in Spanish and English. Media pointed television cameras at the altar, mingled with parishioners and trailed after Sister Mary McCauley of St. Bridget's Hispanic Ministry.

Despite the atypical atmosphere at the church, Luz Maria Ramirez, a Spanish professor from Luther College, said in Spanish that the situation has stabilized since Monday. Ramirez, a native of Mexico who came to Postville earlier this week to volunteer, expected clergy members at the Mass to offer a message of hope and solidarity as a Christian community.

Sister McCauley of St. Bridget's said only 20 sought shelter at the church on Friday night. Church members encouraged the remaining families to rely on each other for housing, but McCauley said the church would continue to provide support. Financial donations, which can be sent to the church, are most helpful, McCauley said.

While many at St. Bridget's sympathized with the families of detainees, not everyone disagreed with the raid.

Parishioner Leon Reicks, a semi driver from Postville, thinks it is important to uphold the laws of the United States, including immigration laws. He also feels compassion.

"I'm sorry for the families that have got children," Reicks said. "That's the tough part there."

On Saturday, Catholic leaders asked for prayers.

Guadalupe Lopez-Valdez, mother of two, had been doing just that. She wore an electronic tracking device on her ankle on Saturday and said her husband was taken in the raid. Lopez-Valdez, who attended Saturday's Mass, expected her family would return to Mexico.

In light of Monday's raids, she prayed for resolution.
"That God continues helping us and that we find a solution soon," Lopez-Valdez said in Spanish.