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Some turn to their faith following raid

KAREN HEINSELMAN, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - Prayers and songs were raised in Spanish and English. Scripture readings advised on the proper treatment of immigrants and prisoners.

And the Rev. Jose Comparan's message Tuesday night included a true story about the priest's difficult journey to U.S. citizenship.

As Northeast Iowans react to the recent raid at Agriprocessors in Postville, some are turning to their faith for answers and direction.

About 100 people turned out for a prayer vigil Tuesday evening at Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Waterloo. Members of the city's four parishes organized the event to show support for hundreds of people taken into custody and also for the detainees' families.

Authorities are investigating alleged cases of identity theft, use of stolen Social Security cards and illegal entrance into the country.

Joni Hansen, who helped organize the vigil, feels compelled to help those affected by the raid.

"These people are our brothers and sisters, and we need to offer them all the prayers and support that we can," she said.

"We will be praying for their ability to be reunited with families," she added.

Three hundred candles flickered inside Queen of Peace as a tribute to the detainees. Members of the clergy representing a variety of denominations attended to demonstrate their solidarity with the detainees. Organizers also took up a collection for families in need of assistance.

For some in Northeast Iowa, Monday's raid illustrated their concerns about the nation's immigration policies and enforcement measures. Literature distributed at the vigil called for political action.

Comparan, pastor and head of the Hispanic ministry at Queen of Peace, said the country also needs a change of heart. He harshly criticized the raid as an ineffective fix that neglects larger related problems that need attention.

"This is an inappropriate form of dealing with issues," Comparan said.

During the homily, the priest drew on personal experience. He explained how he and his siblings lived and worked in the U.S. illegally after their parents grew frustrated with a documentation process that was expensive and inefficient. He became a U.S. citizen as an adult.

Comparan finds the label of "stranger" unfitting for people in the country illegally who are good people. That label, he said, is more appropriately bestowed upon government officials who condone raids.

"They are the strangers, brothers and sisters," Comparan said.

Strong opinions

Such sentiments drew criticism from others in the sanctuary.

Dan Tovar of Waterloo took offense to the tone and content of the prayer vigil. During a time intended for comments from the clergy, Tovar stood in his pew to address the crowd. He chastised the night's speakers for unfairly criticizing the United States, elected officials and law enforcement agents.

Vigil organizer Dave Cushing cut short Tovar's speech, which he considered inappropriate for the setting and purpose of the gathering.

"Sir, you want to turn this into a debate," Cushing said. "We are here to pray."

Parishioners applauded, and members of the clergy redirected the focus.

After the service, Cushing attempted to extend a proverbial olive branch, but Tovar didn't mince words, classifying those sympathetic with the message from the pulpit as ignorant, misguided and liberal. Perhaps well-meaning, he conceded, but not helpful.

Later, Tovar elaborated. He said he thought attempts to draw comparisons between relocations efforts that took place during the Holocaust to a modern-day raid in Postville represented an unfair exaggeration.

"That's an insult," Tovar said.

Tovar was born in the U.S. to parents who were natives of Mexico. He married a woman from Mexico and spent time living in the country. He said he went to Queen of Peace to offer translation services but found the order of the evening surprising.

Other participants at the vigil recognized that dissension exists.

"Nobody's arguing that these people broke the law," Cushing said. "We are asking the bigger question, whether the law is a just law."

Clergy also offered strong opinions.

Dick Clark, pastor of St. Timothy's United Methodist Church in Cedar Falls, said he thinks the way the U.S. treats illegal aliens is "terrible."

"The Bible has a lot to say about the sojourner and the wanderer ... Rather than turn them away, we should practice hospitality," Clark said.

The Rev. Dennis Juhl, a Catholic priest in Waterloo and pastor of the Community of Blessed Sacrament, said he is prepared to resist future efforts to round up people in the country illegally.

"If push comes to shove and there needs to be a safe place, tell people they can come to Blessed Sacrament," Juhl said.

Martha Ives read in Spanish and broke down during the service. She apologized and offered an explanation.

"Our Latino Americans are not here with us tonight," Ives said. "They are hiding. They are scared."

Comparan said the situation in Postville makes some Hispanic families in the Queen of Peace parish nervous. Comparan said he doesn't ask, but he imagines some of the families he works with are in the U.S. illegally.

He said matters of immigration have an impact on the entire community.

"So everyone is affected," he said. "We have to open our eyes."