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'Tell them to come to the church'

Pat Marrin | Sep. 29, 2010 NCR Today

NCR readers will be seeing some full page ads in the paper for a conference on immigration in San Antonio next Jan 12-14. And if you are a regular to this Web site, you can't miss the colorful banner ad for the same conference at the top of this page. The conference is being hosted by *Celebration* magazine, the worship resource of the *National Catholic Reporter*. I am *Celebration* editor, and I will be writing here in the coming weeks to tell how this conference came about and why I think it could be crucial in the life of the church and for our country as we struggle with the question of immigration reform.

The immigration crisis, which is really about both the ongoing flood of desperate economic refugees entering the country and the lack of any coherent path to legal status for millions of undocumented people already in the country, is complicated, many-sided, and has always been the growing edge of our national identity. Our borders and our economy have absorbed and accommodated workers, our universities have welcomed students from all over the world and our cultural life has celebrated new hues, talents and creative energy along with the challenge of change and diversity.

Two things happened to change this openness to assimilation. One was Sept. 11, 2001, and the other has been our faltering economy. The 9-11 attacks put border policy under homeland security, effectively paralyzing the normal flow of immigration. The recession has generated a sense of scarcity and competition, real or perceived, that has fed the nativist and racist fears of an extreme political view now scapegoating immigrants for every social and economic ill the country faces.

It was when I put on my *NCR* hat and covered the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid in tiny Postville, Iowa, in May of 2008 that I saw the human face [1] of our enforcement- and deportation-only immigration policy. Federal officials arrested more than 600, mostly Guatemalan, workers at the Agriprocessors slaughterhouse in northeastern Iowa. At the center of that firestorm stood St. Bridget's Catholic Church, where hundreds more distraught plant workers, their families and children fled for protection. Alerted to the raid and the terror sweeping the immigrant community, pastoral administrator Sr. Mary McCauley had put out a simple message: "Tell them to come to the church."

In that raid, a showcase of force and legal severity, and in the response of the church, I heard the question we will take up in San Antonio and the title of the conference, the need to bring together "Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church's Global Commitment to the Poor."

What is the church's role in the complex and difficult debate over immigration reform? What role will the church's deep theological and liturgical traditions play in forming Catholic parishes to "welcome the stranger" and to make room at the eucharistic table for all our baptized brothers and sisters?

Postville became a watershed moment in the complex and heart-wrenching national story about post 9-11 border control, due process, human rights and family preservation Hanging in the balance is both our history as a nation of immigrants and, it turns out, the future of the Catholic Church in the United States, whose newest arrivals from Latin America and the Caribbean are overwhelmingly Catholic by birth and culture.

I invite you to visit the *Celebration* Web site for more information about the conference [2]. In my next blog I will tell you more about the outstanding line-up of speakers who will be with us in San Antonio to talk about immigration reform and the role of the church. The issue is critical and the timing could not be better.

?By Pat Marrin, *Celebration* editor

Related blogs by Pat Marrin:

- 'Tell them to come to the church' [3]
- The church can make a difference on immigration reform [4]
- Immigration reform is about 'God?s option for the poor' [5]

Fr. Dean Brackley wrote this essay for *NCR* earlier this year: Migrants: illegals or God's ambassadors? [6]

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/1180
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