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'Posada' draws attention to immigration reform

by Michelle Martin by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

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Cindy Jimenez and Emmanuel Huerta portray Mary and Joseph during a Christmastime "posada" in front of the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago Dec. 16. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World) (Dec. 19, 2011)

CHICAGO -- Catholic advocates for immigration reform used a Dec. 16 "posada," a traditional Mexican re-enactment of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in Bethlehem, to demonstrate the need to change the immigration system.

The posada was led by Chicago Auxiliary Bishops John R. Manz and Alberto Rojas and a couple portraying Mary and Joseph as they search for a place where they will be welcomed.

About 250 Catholics from all walks of life joined them at the U.S. Immigration Services Center in Chicago just as the dawn was turning into a cold, clear morning. Participants began with a rosary prayed for those about to be deported and their families, as well as for immigration reform.

The Friday morning rosary services happen throughout the year.

The posada was organized by the Chicago archdiocesan Office for Immigrant Affairs & Immigration Education, Priests for Justice for Immigrants, and Sisters and Brothers of Immigrants. Instead of traveling from house to house or church to church as is the tradition, participants stopped at the federal Metropolitan Correctional Center, DePaul University and Federal Plaza before ending up at St. Peter's in the Loop for hot chocolate, coffee and sweet bread.

Joseph was portrayed by Emmanuel Huerta, 25. Huerta, a member of St. John Bosco, said the posada reminded him of posadas he has seen in Mexico. "It made me feel like I was doing something for God," he said.

Cindy Jimenez, 19, portrayed Mary, with a long white dress and blue veil over her winter coat and hat. Standing front and center before the federal institutions as the pilgrims prayed for shelter helped bring the immigration issue home to her, she said.

"I could feel the rejection," said Jimenez, who is a member of the youth group at St. Clare of Montefalco. "It made me think about what it would like to be deported."

The "peregrines" -- or pilgrims -- drew curious looks as they moved through the Loop during the morning rush hour, accompanied by a minivan with speakers on its roof playing traditional posada music.

Prayers and dialogues at each stop were tailored to the situation.

At DePaul, a young man spoke about being told to study hard, only to find he can't attend college because no government financial aid can go to undocumented students, a situation that would be greatly improved by the federal DREAM Act, or the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act.

That act, which has been proposed several times, would give students who were brought to the United States without documents as children the opportunity for financial aid and eventual citizenship if they complete certain educational goals or serve in the military.

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At Federal Plaza, the peregrinos called on President Barack Obama to make immigration more of a priority.

"We don't believe there is nothing more you can do," they said.

Some people carried banners with messages like "Stop tearing apart families."

Ivonne Valadez, a senior at St. Martin de Porres High School in Waukegan, knows what it is like to be separated from a family member who was deported. When she was small, her father was deported, she remembers how sad it was.

"My mom didn't know what to tell us when we asked where he was," said Valadez, one of 20 students and five adults who left Waukegan at 5:45 a.m. for the 7 a.m. event.

Viatorian Brother Michael Gosch, a guidance counselor at the school, said students have embraced the cause of immigration reform because it affects them and people they know.

"I've had students say to me, 'Brother Gosch, I don't know if my mom will be home when I get home from school or if she will be deported.'"

Valadez said one thing the students can do for deportees and their families is pray, and another is to lift up their voices to advocate for reform.

"We think it's not right," she told the Catholic New World, Chicago's archdiocesan newspaper.

Rich Daniels, for one, agrees with her. A member of Most Holy Redeemer Parish in Evergreen Park, he has started working with the Office for Immigrant Affairs in recent months.

"I think the Founding Fathers of this country would be embarrassed at how we are treating immigrants," Daniels said. "We have short memories in this country. We were all immigrants, or our families were. We stand up for immigrants' rights, we stand up for workers.

"We have a wonderful system of government in this country, and we should share it with people who want to come here."

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