

July 12, 2008

ON RELIGION

Immigrants Find Solace After Storm of Arrests

By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

POSTVILLE, [Iowa](#) — Back in 2002, before all the trouble, the Rev. Paul Ouderkirk retired from St. Bridget's [Roman Catholic Church](#) here, his last station in 43 years of ministry. He built a home 35 miles away in a town along the Mississippi, and he indulged a passion for family history, tracing his lineage to an ancestor who had arrived in New Amsterdam with the Dutch East India Company.

Once a month or so, Father Ouderkirk drove back to St. Bridget's to officiate at a wedding or baptize a baby. He savored those rituals, proof that the Hispanic immigrants who had arrived over the past decade to work in Postville's kosher-meat plant were setting down roots. Some had bought homes. Their children had graduated from high school, even been selected for the National Honor Society.

Then came the morning of May 12, when both satisfaction and retirement ended for the 75-year-old priest. Federal [immigration](#) agents raided the Agriprocessors factory, arresting nearly 400 workers, most of them men, for being in the United States illegally. Within minutes of the raid, with surveillance helicopters buzzing above the leafy streets, the wives and children of Mexican and Guatemalan families began trickling into St. Bridget's Church, the safest place they knew.

It was about that time, with several dozen cowering people inside the church, when Sister Mary McCauley, the pastor administrator at St. Bridget's, found out that Father Ouderkirk was attending a ceremony for diocesan priests nearly two hours away in Dubuque. Unable to reach him directly, she left a simple, urgent message: "We need to see a collar here."

By the time Father Ouderkirk extricated himself and reached Postville in the evening, nearly 400 families, some of them not even Catholic, filled the rotunda and social hall of St. Bridget's. They occupied every pew, every aisle, every folding chair, every inch of floor. Children clutched mothers. One girl shook uncontrollably.

A few volunteers from the old Postville, descendants of the Irish and Norwegian immigrants who settled here more than a century ago, set out food. Others took turns standing watch at the church door, as if the sight of an Anglo might somehow dissuade the feared Migra, as the immigrants call [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), from invading their sanctuary.

Already, members of the church staff and a Spanish teacher from a nearby college were tallying the names of the detained workers. Father Ouderkirk conducted his own version of a census in this predominantly Hispanic parish. Gone were all but two members of the choir he had assembled over the years. Gone were all but one of the eight altar servers. Gone were the husbands from the weddings he had performed, and gone were the fathers of the children he had baptized.

As for the mothers, many of them also worked at Agriprocessors and had been arrested. In a putative show of compassion, federal authorities released them after putting an electronic homing device on each woman's ankle to monitor her whereabouts. These mothers were, in the new lexicon of Postville, "las personas con brazaletes," the people with a bracelet.

During his earlier tenure at parishes in North Texas and Marshalltown, Iowa, Father Ouderkirk had experienced immigration raids twice before, but never on this scale. By the second day, he had moved back into his bedroom in the rectory.

"It's like God saying, 'I gave you a little practice,' because this is the worst," Father Ouderkirk said in an interview late last month at St. Bridget's. "This has happened after 10 years of stable living. These people were in school. They were achieving. It has ripped the heart out of the community and out of the parish. Probably every child I baptized has been affected. To see them stunned is beyond belief."

The only redemptive thing that can be said, perhaps, is that in the crisis at Postville — with nearly 400 immigrants imprisoned and facing deportation, with 40 mothers under house arrest awaiting their own court dates, with families that had two working parents now forced to survive on handouts from a food pantry — the beacon of the Roman Catholic Church to immigrants has rarely shone more brilliantly.

"I came to the church because I feel safe there, I feel secure," said Irma López, the mother of a 2-year-old daughter, who was arrested along with her husband, Marcelo, after they had worked at Agriprocessors for six years. "I feel protected. I feel at peace. I feel comforted."

At a practical level, Father Ouderkirk has hired four temporary staff members to help track the court cases and distribute food and financial aid to the affected families. Along with other religious leaders around Iowa, he had been preparing for a march in defense of immigrants' rights. St. Bridget's parish, which has only about 350 members, is spending \$500,000 in the relief effort, he said.

One month after the raid, St. Bridget's held a Mass in remembrance of the detainees. The name of every one was recited from the altar, and after every 20 names, a candle was lighted, usually by a persona con brazaletes. The candles, half burned, remain in the nave, beneath a wood carving of the Virgin Mother, each one an offering for a miracle.

"I pray to God for the opportunity to stay in this country so my daughter can be educated here," Mrs. López said. "That was my dream."

Sitting in the rectory alongside Mrs. López, Rosa Zamora nodded in agreement. "When I pray, I know God is close to me," said Mrs. Zamora, whose husband, like Mrs. López's, is now jailed in Louisiana awaiting deportation to Guatemala. "I know there are laws, but God is the judge of everything."

Judgment of a different sort, though, has been visited on Father Ouderkirk and his aides. One anonymous phone message warned him, "What you're doing is against the law. Harboring criminals." Sister Mary received an unsigned letter stating: "You are as far as possible from being the image of [Mother Teresa](#). May you rot in hell."

It is infuriating in a particular way for Father Ouderkirk and his staff members to hear from such nativists.

St. Bridget's Spanish-speaking lay pastor, Paul Real, has forebears who settled in what is now New Mexico in the 1500s. And Father Ouderkirk's heritage, of course, goes back to the Dutch colonists.

"I think it's made me more empathetic," he said. "I think of the chances my ancestors had. Here are people who've been here 10 years, and to get torn up like this, it's doesn't make any sense to me. It cuts so deep. Like Sister Mary says, once you've cried for two straight weeks, you don't have any more tears. But it doesn't mean you stopped feeling."

E-mail: sgfreedman@nytimes.com

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
