

# A Welcoming Church

## Mississippi congregation reaches out after devastating immigration raid

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

On August 25, 2008, the small town of Laurel, Mississippi was the site of the largest single workplace site raid in U.S. history. Early that morning hundreds of Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) agents swooped down on the Howard Industries plant in Laurel, which produces electric transformers, and began rounding up workers. Anyone who appeared to be of Hispanic origin was separated from other workers and escorted outside to a fenced yard. Roads around the sprawling plant were blocked and ICE helicopters hovered overhead. One resident thought there had been a terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup> For the 595 immigrant workers that were arrested that day, there might as well have been. By evening of that long, hot summer day, 488 immigrant workers, many in handcuffs, had been transported on dozens of ICE buses to an immigrant detention center in Jena, Louisiana, four hours away—ripped apart from their families and a community they had come to think of as home. Another 107 persons, mostly women, had been deemed “humanitarian” cases<sup>2</sup> and were released with electronic monitoring devices attached to their ankles. They were forced to wear these devices day and night for 22 months.

In the midst of such terror, a small Catholic church became the center of solace and assistance. Several Catholic agencies and the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic also played key roles in assisting raid victims. This article examines the Church’s response to the raid in Laurel,<sup>3</sup> and how a small Catholic community in the middle of a deeply conservative state was able to mitigate some of the harmful effects of the raid on its immigrant members.

### Church Response and Challenges

On the afternoon of the raid several dozen family members of arrested immigrants gathered at the safest place they could think of at such a frightening time—Immaculate Conception Church (ICC) in Laurel. ICC has been serving Hispanic immigrants since the mid-1990s, when many came to work in poultry plants in Jones County. At the time of the raid approximately 700 persons attended Sunday Masses at ICC, including about 350 Hispanics.

Although the church had no plan to respond to such a crisis when the raid occurred, it soon became the center of response efforts and a major conduit for assistance. The church organized a meeting in its parish hall that same afternoon. Several agencies—including Catholic Charities staff from Jackson, Mississippi, and New Orleans, and the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic—interviewed family members and the raid victims who had been released. They worked to determine humanitarian and legal needs and to provide resources. The evening of the raid, the church converted its hall into living quarters for 20 women and children too frightened to return to their homes. Anglo parishioners brought meals and blankets. Food and money began pouring in immediately from other church parishes in Mississippi and from across the country—including an entire trailer of food from a Midwest church.

—Continued on page 2



Hispanic Ministries Coordinator Laura Hamilton, church volunteer Leroy Hamilton, and Pastor Michael Thornton in front of Immaculate Conception Church in Laurel, Mississippi. Immaculate Conception staff and church members provided vital assistance to the victims of the largest single worksite raid in U.S. history in Laurel on August 25, 2008.

#### INSIDE:

CST and Unemployment .....	p. 3
Employment Slow to Rebound .....	p. 4
International Caritas Assembly .....	p. 6
A Curious Case of Racial Amnesia .....	p. 7

*JustSouth* is published quarterly by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA, 70118. Copyright 2008 @ Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X.

The cash donations, which totaled \$150,000, were administered by ICC parish staff and were spent mainly to pay rent and utilities. To save expenses, many of those affected gave up their own apartments and moved in with friends or family members in Laurel. ICC Deacon Larry Presley helped to coordinate donations of food and money from members of ICC, who were generous in their support of raid victims. ICC provided assistance over the next two years to more than 250 families and 25 individuals affected by the raid. In addition to material assistance, the spiritual counseling and emotional support provided by ICC's pastoral staff were extremely important. The despair that remaining family members felt over the loss of a spouse or parent was at times overwhelming. Kind and attentive listening helped boost flagging spirits and give thoughtful consideration of options for leaving or staying in Laurel.

In a study conducted by the Urban Institute of communities that have been affected by ICE raids, researchers found that competent legal assistance is one of the most important and most difficult services to obtain for victims.<sup>4</sup> That was not the case in Laurel. Legal assistance was provided to victims by several Catholic and non-Catholic agencies in Mississippi and Louisiana, with the bulk of representation provided by the Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic.<sup>5</sup>

Transportation for raid victims from non-urban areas to immigration hearings was another challenge the Urban Institute study noted.<sup>6</sup> ICC was able to overcome the difficulty of transporting victims to court hearings in New Orleans and Jackson with a 28-seat bus donated to the church in 2007 and a 7-seat van the church received after Hurricane Katrina.

### Factors That Contributed to a Successful Response

Years of contact with a mission church in Mexico and church leadership fluent in Spanish made this small congregation in the middle of a state with a small immigrant population<sup>7</sup> surprisingly well-positioned to respond to parishioners' needs after the raid. Monsignor Michael Thornton, the ICC pastor, had served as a pastor at mission churches in Mexico for 11 years. The ICC coordinator for Hispanic ministries, Mrs. Laura Hamilton, is from Mexico and is well known and trusted in the Laurel Hispanic community for years of charitable work with newcomers. The assistant pastor at the time, Fr. Sergio Balderas, is also from Mexico.

ICC had been sending youth and adult groups, including all three of ICC's deacons, to a mission church in Mexico for more than 40 years. Monsignor Thornton believes these immersion and faith formation experiences helped to build cohesion and understanding among parishioners for the victims of the raid and resulted in generous assistance from the Anglo parishioners. Additionally, the church had built excellent relationships with local police and local schools.

### Conclusion

Almost three years later, the help and support that ICC provided the community has resulted in Hispanic membership at the same levels as before the raid. When asked what she felt about the raid and its aftermath, one parishioner responded, "I am sad because most of the co-workers and friends that I knew and cared for are not here anymore. [But] now I have a great church community that helps strengthen my faith and is there for me all the time."

The terror and lingering trauma caused by worksite raids have been put on hold by the Obama administration, which has shifted worksite enforcement focus from arresting workers to pressuring employers not to hire undocumented workers. However, until comprehensive immigration reform is realized, millions of immigrant workers will continue to live with the constant fear that their lives could be upended and their families shattered because of their lack of legal status. By its efforts, Immaculate Conception Church illustrates how a caring faith community can accompany its immigrant members during their darkest hours.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 From an interview with Leroy Hamilton, long-time resident of Jones County, Mississippi, on December 2, 2010. Information on the Laurel community response was provided to the author during interviews with Leroy Hamilton, Laura Hamilton, Monsignor Michael Thornton, and Fr. Sergio Balderas conducted December 2010 through March 2011.
- 2 Humanitarian cases included the primary caretakers of children or pregnant women.
- 3 Other organizations that played important roles assisting raid victims included The Village-El Pueblo, from Biloxi, Mississippi, which provided legal assistance and administered a bond fund, and the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, which also provided legal assistance and informed workers of their rights. Fr. Tom Greene, S.J., who was the JSRI migration specialist at the time, helped conduct intakes and assisted raid victims at their hearings in Gulfport and New Orleans. Sacred Heart Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, led by Fr. Ken Landry, provided extensive assistance to raid victims living in the Hattiesburg area.
- 4 Ajay Chaudry, Randolph Capps, Juan Pedroza, Rosa Maria Castaneda, Robert Santos, and Molly Schott, *Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, February, 2010 (accessed May 5, 2011 at [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020\\_FacingOurFuture\\_final.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020_FacingOurFuture_final.pdf)).
- 5 The Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic represented 67 of the 107 persons who were released on ankle bracelets after the Laurel raid. Interview with Laila Hlass, staff attorney, Loyola University New Orleans Law Clinic, February 23, 2011.
- 6 *Ibid*, Chaudry, *et al.*
- 7 In 2008, Mississippi was home to just 60,555 foreign-born persons, who composed only 2.1 percent of the state's population. American FactFinder, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey, 1-year Estimates (accessed May 7, 2011, at <http://factfinder.census.gov>).