

RECTOR'S CORNER

IMMIGRATION PART II (Of Three Parts)

To The Border

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...
Send these, the hopeless, tempest-tossed to me.
I lift up my lamp beside the golden door.”

Emma Lazarus *The New Colossus*

What happens when the “golden door” becomes a concrete wall?

In the last issue (April) of the Parish Newsletter, I tried to sketch some of the issues pertaining to the complex subject of immigration. I cautioned against making the grievous error of using immigrants as convenient political scapegoats. I also raised up some of the biblical and moral imperatives which I believe speak with clarity to many of the human aspects of immigration.

While on retreat in March at The Desert House of Prayer just north of Tucson, I had an unexpected opportunity to join two volunteers in crossing the US-Mexico border at Nogales. Maria is the person who does all the cleaning at the retreat center. She is 58 years old. She is originally from a small mountain village in Mexico. We have become friends during my visits over the last three years. Margaret was formerly a religious in the Redemptorist order. She has since become laicized. Her vocation now focuses on the plight of immigrants from Mexico and other Hispanic nations. She attempts to meet basic human needs in very small ways. “At my age (66), I do not expect to change the world, but I want to do what I can.” Once, twice or even three times a week she makes the trip from Tucson to the other side of the border, about a two hour drive south

of Tucson. With her own money or with small donations from others, she buys sandwich supplies; bread, cheese, bologna, mayonnaise, small candies, first aid supplies and whatever else she can tote in a backpack and collapsible hand-pushed cart.

Maria and I drove to pick up Margaret and the supplies, and then headed south down Route 19 to the Mexican border. We traveled through majestic desert country, through Green Valley, Tubac and Tumacacori. Margaret spoke informatively most of the drive down, filling us in on the history of the very early mission churches we passed along the way. Beginning in 1687, an Italian Jesuit missionary named Fr. Eusebio Kino began working with the indigenous peoples of what we now know as the State of Arizona and the Mexican State of Sonora. During his life time he helped establish nine missionary churches. Tumacacori is the site of one of the best preserved of all the edifices.

Margaret pointed out the gathering places of “The Minutemen”, a vigilante group who are determined to stem the flow of Latinos across the border. Although I imagine that their righteousness is ingenuous, their “game” suggests a demeaning form of Paintball, with real human beings, who are attempting to escape grinding poverty, as their targets. A recreational immigrant hunt. Margaret also showed us the places where the “Samaritans” left supplies of water and food for the *migrantes* as they make their way north. The Samaritans are a church-based group attempting to provide basic humanitarian aid. “It is never a crime to give humanitarian aid.” (No More Deaths). The Minutemen and the Samaritan represent two opposing points of view, reflecting on a small scale the larger national debate.

To the East the imposing peaks of the Santa Rita Mountains erupt from the high desert. The Santa Cruz River, which flows north down from Mexico to Tucson, creates a swath of green between the highway and the mountains. The land we are passing through once belonged to Mexico (up until 1853), a fact not

forgotten in Mexican history classes. Before the Spanish arrived, there were no borders at all. Indigenous peoples of northern and southern regions traveled freely, needless to say, without papers. After the United States acquired substantial parts of Mexico, what we now know as Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, and all of California, Mexicans traveled comfortably back and forth across the border well into the 1970s. Woody Guthrie's poignant and sometimes haunting lyrics in *Pastures of Plenty (1941)* capture something of the life of migrant farm workers and their deep relationship with the land. In the last two verses one senses Guthrie's own impassioned and sympathetic advocacy for the migrants.

“It's a mighty hard row that my poor hands have hoed;
My poor feet have traveled a hot dusty road.
Out of your dust bowl and westward we rolled,
Your desert was hot and your mountains were cold.

I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes,
Slept on the ground in the light of your moon,
On the edge of your city you've seen us and then,
We come with the dust and we go with the wind.

California, Arizona, I make all your crops,
And it's north up to Oregon to harvest your hops;
Dig the beets from the ground cut the grapes from your vines,
To set on your table your light sparkling wine.

Green pastures of plenty from dry desert ground,
From that Grand Coulee Dam where the waters run down,

Every state in this union us migrants have been,
We work in this fight and we'll fight till we win.

Well, it's always we ramble that river and I,
Along your green valley I'll work till I die,
My land I'll defend with my life if it be,
'Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free.”

Signs of the Border Patrol increased dramatically as we approached the border. BP pickup trucks, vans and patrol cars were everywhere. A drone aircraft circled an area of open desert presumably conducting electronic surveillance. Margaret pointed to several buses belonging to a Bus line that had been outsourced by the U.S. Immigration Service to transport deportees from Phoenix to the other side of the border. The windows of the buses were blacked out making it impossible to see in or out.

There are two towns named Nogales, one on the American side of the border and the other on the Mexican side. We stopped at a fast food place just before parking on the U.S. side of the line. We had gained 1000' of altitude over Tucson and the air was chillier than I expected. The liveliness and warmth of the Mexican-American employees created a festive, communal environment. This would make a startling contrast to the Welcome Center of No Mas Muertes where we were headed.

We parked our car at the border and walked towards the checkpoint, pushing a cart with supplies. We simply announced our identity, “No More Deaths” to the border guards and they let us through. It was amazingly easy. I was struck by the volume of large 16 wheeler trucks passing with ease in both directions. NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) has facilitated the increased flow of material goods back and forth, even while human traffic has

been increasingly suppressed.

Not knowing what to expect, I felt nervous and excited, also curious about what I would see and learn. I had wondered what I could do to help so I asked permission to bring some oil from The Desert House of Prayer for healing and anointing.

It was a short walk through from the check point to the No More Deaths Welcome Center. Physically, it is a somewhat bleak place. There were metal scraps of fence on the brown dirt left from a new fence topped with razor wire. Below in a gully was a larger American fence. This was a place of formidable barriers, a place designed to keep the “enemy” out. “Something there is that doesn't love a wall.”(R. Frost)

A banner over two tents read “Welcome Migrants”. There was a brand new Red Cross trailer that was not yet in use. People were milling around. The atmosphere was convivial. It had already been a busy morning. It turned out that this particular day would be one of the busiest ever for this hospitality station with over 500 deportees passing through. No one is obliged to come here but many do. Last year there were 144,000. It is a simple, rustic operation. In the kitchen tent a gas stove is the main piece of equipment. There is a large pot on the stove with ramen noodles cooking. Margaret introduces Maria and me to Gilberto, a former deportee whose full time ministry (7 days a week) now is to manage this hospitality center. He and two others sleep there at the center since there is no security system and they need a place to sleep. This is not a shelter. Recently deported persons needing shelter go into the Mexican town of Nogales for a limited number of beds. In the kitchen tent there are several large tables loaded down with tanks of Cool aid and water, cups, bowls for soup, spoons, napkins and other necessities such as a modest assemblage of first aid supplies. A shortage of storage space means that someone is frequently going to a small trailer in back for replenishments. The trailer seems to have about

everything necessary in it and also provides sleeping space for Gilberto and his two associates. Gilberto is comfortable in his role and seems to appreciate our presence. He introduces us to some other folks. An older gentleman, Gabriel, short of stature but wide of smile, sweeps the dirt floor and gently shoos away a camp dog looking for a morsel. Later in the day when we were leaving I saw him washing out paper and plastic cups for re-use.

In the second tent are some folks who have recently been deposited at the Mexican side of the border (*la frontera* or *la linea*). There are some family members together, noticeably two attractive sisters of Mayan descent (perhaps 18 and 25 years old) dressed in colorful sweatpants. They are from Oaxaca. Later, I will meet their aunt and other family members. There are many young men in their early twenties, some in their 30s and a few teens.

They are mostly strangers to each other connected by common circumstances. They sit on plastic chairs. There are periods of silence, chatting and laughter. They have been fed and are resting, waiting for someone else in the family to arrive, planning their next move, thinking about how to get back home or perhaps hoping to make another attempt to cross the border. The “deals” with the Coyote sometimes include more than one attempt at crossing. It is not unusual for someone to make three or four times before they finally succeed or give up. One man says that he was on his way to Georgia as an agricultural worker when he was arrested. He was held for four months in a regional detention centers before being shipped to Phoenix, a central staging area. Detainees are flown from other locations to Phoenix before they are bused from the detention center back to Mexico. The Nogales portal is one of several along the border.

The staff at No Mas Muertes does not look kindly on the “coyotes”, the guides who charge exorbitant fees to lead *migrantes* to the American side. The staff sees the coyotes as untrustworthy men who prey upon the poverty and

misfortunes of their fellow country men and women. During our time at this way-station a locally well known coyote shows up and engages some recently returned deportees. He has a red and white wide-striped jersey. Unlike most of the deportees he appears to be well fed. Gilberto calls the Mexican border police who come by and appear to have a cordial chat with this coyote. Then they leave and he stays.

IMMIGRATION PART III

Human Faces

Margaret, Maria and I find a table in back of the kitchen tent and set about making bologna and cheese sandwiches for those who have just arrived. The mayo runs out. When the cheese also runs out we put two pieces of bread together with just the slice of bologna. It is pretty rudimentary but is what we can do. We distribute the sandwiches. Margaret lightly reprimands me when I inadvertently give out seconds. I am assigned the job of giving out small candies (*dulces*). Our meager offerings are accepted with nods of appreciation or words of gratitude. Many are preoccupied or just plain exhausted.

A bus has just dropped off another group which slowly ambles to the welcome tents. My job is to pour out cups of water or cool aid as fast as possible as people enter the kitchen tent. Their faces look blank, wary, tired, depleted and worried as they approach the tent. Many are dressed in dark blue or black clothing. I welcome them, "*Bienvenido*" or "*Buenas tardes*". They are grateful. With smiling eyes, one weary man says to me, "*Dios le bendiga.*" May God bless you. And I feel humbled and blessed.

I do not see defeat, bitterness or anger, though perhaps profound discouragement. Most have paid \$1500.00-\$3000.00 for their failed attempts. Some may have sold land in order to get to a place where they expected to find work and then send money back to their families. Some, lacking other

resources, will try to smuggle drugs across the border in lieu of a cash payment to their coyote. I am curiously moved by the absence of rancor and anger. Perhaps this is a fatalism that comes from centuries of defeat and oppression. “*Es la vida*” It's life. Perhaps it's a deep faith or trust in God. Both?

Money sent home is a huge source of revenue in the Mexican economy. I have seen with my own eyes the grinding poverty that sends many out of their villages and away from their families. I once visited the family of one such laborer who works at a horse farm in the Salisbury area. He has not been home for several years to visit his wife and five children, has no other companions with him here and calls his wife once a week. He is an *indigena*, a Mayan with only 3 years of primary school education. His ancestors freely roamed this vast continent thousands of years ago. The recent tightening up and militarization of the border has had the effect of keeping some immigrants here on American soil much longer they want. Worker permits or visas would allow them to enter and leave without being criminalized as well as providing a means for appropriate and reasonable border control.

Permits might also protect immigrants from exploitation and abusive labor practices. Legalization would also provide a system for the payment of federal taxes. Currently there are many (about two million) who, although not documented, pay federal income tax. Worker permits would dramatically increase the number who would pay. They would also help restore basic dignity to immigrants and charge accountability for employers.

Whose land is this anyway? What if we thought of the earth and the land as belonging to God and us as its stewards? What if we considered ourselves to be not only the stewards of the land, air, sea, and of the material wealth we possess, but also as vigilant stewards of God's justice?

“They don't like us. They don't want us there.” One man looks me in the eyes and tells me my country does not want him. He seems hurt and puzzled. I

am sorry. This is painful. Obfuscation rules. Because it has no constructive or coherent immigration policy, the United States implements forced deportation. I am grateful to be able to offer something small in the way of respect and care. I fashion a primitive cross from two discarded cuttings from the fence and place it on the food table. I mean to bring it home but leave it there.

A little known but significant piece of American-Mexican history: following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, thousands of Mexican males streamed across the border to come to assist the United States by volunteering to serve in the armed forces. They had remembered how about 70 years earlier the United States had helped Mexico repel an invasion by the French. Of course, those who volunteered had not been involved in the famous Cinco de Maya battle in Puebla where the French advance towards Mexico City came to a halt. But they remembered their history and felt a debt of gratitude.

Here at the Welcome Center a new bus arrives every 20-25 minutes. The pace of providing hospitality at times is fast because of the large numbers. In the lulls we talk with the staff and others who seem to have some relationship with the effort. Not everyone joins in the work. One handsome man in his thirties works for the local government in Nogales. He mostly hangs out. I wonder if he is up to more than he conveys.

Antonio is in his mid to late 30s. He comes limping in to the shelter. Like many his footwear was not up to the grueling conditions of the desert crossing. To make matters worse there were penetrating, cold rains a few days earlier. Many have horrendous blisters and calluses. Antonio has a kind face and does not seem to expect much. We talk. He has three children, ages 19, 13 and 6. He is from Chiapas in southern Mexico. Like Oaxaca next to it, Chiapas has a large indigenous, or Indian, population. The Mayan language and culture is similar to that of Northern Guatemala which Chiapas borders. The porous border with Guatemala was clearly not drawn on the basis of shared ethnic or cultural

identity.

On the very day NAFTA was written into law, there were demonstrations in Chiapas against the Mexican government's participation in the new arrangement. In Chiapas, the production and consumption of corn has always been fundamental to the diet and economy. NAFTA (1993) would allow corn farmers from Kansas to dump large quantities of corn in Mexico thereby destabilizing and damaging the fragile local agricultural economy.

Antonio crossed the border so that he could provide for his family, something he cannot adequately do now in his own country. His boots were worn out. Margaret had set up a foot care station. She had a box of first aid supplies; cotton, ointments, soap, scissors, disinfectant, bandages etc. She had turned over a box for a foot stool. I ask Antonio if he would like her to care for his feet. He seems embarrassed at first but then relents. His feet are swollen with huge, red blisters. This is not a ministry I am ready for, but I am deeply touched by Margaret's comfort level and the tender, healing care she provides. Sometimes she spends as much as 15 minutes on a foot. She has set aside a basin with soapy water for foot bathing for those who would receive her ministrations. Over the short time he is here, I see the drained look on Antonio's face disappear. He seems refreshed and restored by the time he leaves. I pull him aside and give him some money for his trip back. Before he leaves, one of the staff goes to the camper and finds a new pair of boots for Antonio. This pleases him immensely. It cannot be easy on the human spirit to be arrested, incarcerated and deported when you are trying to support your family.

Others hobble in and take a seat. The benefits of Margaret's care are obvious. Occasionally, she calls out for help in locating a pair of scissors or other supply. She works without interruption from her make-shift station. She reminds me of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, as he encourages them to follow his example of what it means to be a servant. If you love me then love

each other as I have loved you.

A thin man, clearly in pain, walks in and sits down. He has fallen on a rock in the desert and injured his knee. Margaret throws me an ace bandage and tells me to wrap his knee. I do not know what I am doing but do the best I can. The whole day is like that, feeling inadequate in the face of great needs but somehow managing to make a small difference. I am confident that our presence and intentions by themselves have some meaning for our guests. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to meet and serve these folks in distress.

At some point, I let it be known that I am a priest and that I have brought with me the oil for blessing and healing. No Mas Muertes is in no way an evangelical operation interested in proselytizing. So I do not want my offer to be misunderstood, but I make it. Two shy and perhaps curious men approach me; I ask them if they would like to receive the anointing. They nod yes. I remember a time perhaps ten years ago when I was visiting a Mexican Church with a group of Christian educators. The priest asked us if he could give us each a blessing. We lined up and knelt by the rail. One by one, he laid hands on our heads and said the words of blessing and healing. His offering was a deep blessing I never forgot. I was happy now to be able to offer something similar.

“La bendición y curación de Dios omnipotente, Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo sean contigo y con tu familia ahora y por siempre.” “Amen.” I included their families in the blessing because their families are very important to them and many are far from home.

Soon others, men and women, line up to receive the blessing. In blessing I felt blessed. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, speaks of “the inexplicable alchemy of compassion”, noting the deep comfort that the one who gives comfort receives.

Other Faces: One woman had been working in California for 9 years before her deportation. Another man from Denver had been pulled over for a

minor traffic violation and subsequently arrested and deported. He had lived and worked in Denver for 16 years and had established a family there.

Carlos is 19 years old, alone and broke. His unsuccessful passage from El Salvador cost him \$3000.00. I can't imagine how he put together that much money and wagered it against the risks of the trip. His loss seems enormous. I am told that sometimes people sell their land in order to pay the coyote's exorbitant fees. Carlos has no family or friends with him. He appears bright and certainly motivated and brave. He looks down at the earth. Like many here, he is exhausted. He is close to the age of my own boys and I contemplate how different his life circumstances are from theirs. I talk with him and ask him how he will get back to El Salvador. I feel for him. Before he leaves I discreetly give him a small gift of money for his travel expenses. He manages a smile of appreciation.

Another group arrives. A Mayan woman, the aunt for whom the two younger women from Oaxaca had been waiting, is among the newly deported. She is 52 and the desert trek has nearly done her in. She collapses in tears on a wooden bench. She is inconsolable. Her husband and a few other family members are with her. There is a concern that she might be a diabetic. The two younger women try to help her but she seems out of reach. Someone calls the Red Cross (Cruz Roja) for medical assistance. They arrive within fifteen minutes. A uniformed nurse checks her blood pressure as she sits up for the first time. Her eyes are cast down. She seems to be a little better. She sits and rests on the bench, taking small amounts of nourishment offered by others. Her face is weathered and her expression sorrowful. I talk to her to see if there is anything I can do. The ordeal she has been through has left her terrified. I tell her not to be afraid now. *No ten miedo*. One of the younger women asks her if she wants to receive the oil of healing. She does not respond at first but later changes her mind. I press my thumb wet with oil on her forehead, making the

sign of the cross and saying the holy words. Her ululations are ancient, deep and shake me to the bones. I would do more to console her if I could. I sit down on the bench a few spaces away. Later, when she manages to get on her feet to go, I move to her side and embrace her around the shoulders, telling her not to be afraid, that she is safe now.

When she goes to leave with her family, she unexpectedly takes my right hand and presses it briefly to her lips. Her gaze is still down. Then she leaves. It is strange to have such intense exchanges followed by leave-takings. I have little sense of what comes next for these folks.

We move easily and quickly back across the border to the US side. I feel exhausted. I do not have words for what I have seen and felt. I know that I feel grateful, humbled and pained. Maria feels the same way, emotionally wiped out. She decides to make trips to No Mas Muertes a regular part of her life. Margaret will continue to go 2-3 times a week.

The next morning, at the Sunday Eucharist at Desert House of Prayer, as Maria and I talk about our experiences the day before, her eyes fill up with tears. I tell her that I had also cried earlier in the day as I sat by myself and watched the sun rise over the desert, bringing a new day.