

RECTOR'S CORNER

There is a sign at The Desert House of Prayer that says, "Humanitarian aid is never a crime." In the lower corner in smaller print it says "No More Deaths", "No Mas Muertes". No More Deaths is grass roots organization whose main purpose is to prevent the tragic deaths (there are many) of those who cross the border between Mexico and America. Deaths result from dehydration and exposure to temperature extremes during the trek across the desert; from murders and occasionally and from suffocation in abandoned trucks. No More deaths attempts to provide humanitarian relief to those in need. When H.R. 4437 passed in December of 2005, the bill made it illegal to provide humanitarian aid to illegal immigrants, punishable by up to 5 years in jail. It was the same bill that called for the construction of a 700 mile fence along the U.S. Border with Mexico. Fortunately, at least the criminalization of humanitarian aid was later rescinded. The Senate Judiciary Committee determined in March of last year that there would not be penalties for humanitarian or church groups providing help to undocumented workers. Nor would these workers be labeled "criminals". Another step in the right direction.

But in recent months raids (recently in New Bedford, MA) and roundups of undocumented workers have escalated, bringing heartbreak to families often separated by these procedures. There is something morally repugnant about these raids and the 15' border wall topped with razor wire.

The intensity of the political debate around immigration reform is coming to a boil as the 2008 election approaches. There are those who seek new and constructive laws that would respect the dignity of the undocumented while also establishing reasonable legal expectations. The ugly side of this controversy includes racism and jingoism. In another part of this Newsletter, Gaile Binzen writes about Islam, opening our hearts and minds to see the *imago dei* (the image of God) in those whose religion and culture are different from ours in

many respects.

We may forget that our ancestors were once immigrants, many without papers. There is an urgent need for the reform of U.S Immigration laws. Currently, we have placed those who are poor and vulnerable in the middle of an impossible situation, with one voice quietly saying “Come on over, work for us (often at low wages). Pick our fruit and vegetables, build and paint our homes, tend our gardens, staff our restaurant kitchens,etc”. Another voice says, “You are 'Illegals'. We will round you up, put you in detention centers and send you back where you came from.”

Fr. Ricardo, A Jesuit priest, who has committed 40 years of his life to border ministry in Southern Arizona, deplors the term, “illegal” as a way of referring to undocumented people. To reduce another human being to such a narrow and pejorative identity is to dehumanize him or her. Demonization of other human beings is dangerous and often provides the first step towards abuse, torture and murder. (For examples, Abu Ghraib and the Detention Camps for Japanese-Americans during World War II) To those who need an “enemy”, demonization provides shallow comfort and phony justification for a wide range of large and small crimes against humanity. Even “terrorists” are human beings. The folks crossing our border with Mexico are not our enemy.

What does our faith tell us about this often confusing issue? How are we to act in an environment of fear? What is the difference between civil laws and the tenets of an ancient faith? Our Baptismal Covenant instructs us to “seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves”. It is not a crime to provide humanitarian aid to undocumented people. In fact, such acts of compassion and mercy express some of the deepest convictions of our Judeo-Christian faith.

In *Who is My Neighbor?* written last year by Carolyn Carney, the author reminds us of the longstanding moral imperative to assist the

sojourner, immigrant in our midst. She writes,

“ We are instructed in Scripture, time and again, to care for orphans, widows, the poor and aliens. The latter is a reminder to Israel that they were, although God's chosen people, once foreigners in a land not their own. In the Old Testament, Israel's identity was wrapped up in the identity of their father, Abraham, who left his family and all that was familiar to him to sojourn in a place, a foreign place, God would show him. When they finally came into the promised land, God reminded the Hebrews that, like the Garden, they were to till the land, take good care of it, steward it (for God owned the land), but they were merely sojourners. “For the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.”(Lev. 25:23)

The recent observance of Earth Day reminds us that the earth belongs to God and that we are to be its caretakers. God owns the land, not us. We are all sojourners in this life, and should treat each other with respect and hospitality due the “travelers” in our midst. Carney continues,

“In Leviticus 19:34, we read, 'The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’ The hospitality of the the Middle East is famous. Amongst earlier nomadic peoples it was not only gracious but connected to survival. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures appeals to the historic memory of the Hebrews, reminding them of their suffering as slaves in Egypt and their ordeals wandering in the wilderness/desert. Instructions were given that when harvest time came, the edges of the field should be left for the poor and the alien.

As a people of faith, current federal laws notwithstanding, we are directed towards works of compassion and mercy.

“Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked

and clothe thee?"

And the answer, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me." (Matthew 25:37)

In the next newsletter, in order to give this discussion a more human face I will describe a visit I made with two volunteers to the other side of the border, to Nogales, Mexico.