

BOOK REVIEWS

Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail. By Ruben Martinez. New York: Picador, 2002. 354 pp. \$14.00. *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit.* By Daniel G. Groody. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 224 pp. \$24.05.

When I first came to National City, California, near the Mexican border to begin our Franciscan outreach to immigrants in the spring of 1998, I wondered, "What makes immigrants from Mexico & Central America take such deadly risks in crossing the border?" Within a week, my answer came. Two vanloads each carrying 35 men and women from Oaxaca, Mexico, had sped north across the US-Mexico border at San Ysidro through the southbound lane, led by their *coyotes* who had promised to deliver them to downtown Los Angeles. One of the vans pulled into an orchard in northern San Diego County just as an INS helicopter landed nearby. The immigrants were rounded up and sent back to Tijuana. The second van screeched into our neighborhood's shopping center and crashed into the window of the Lucky Store, sending 19 of the occupants to the hospital with injuries. The next day I was visiting Casa del Migrante, a shelter for immigrant men run by the Scalabrini Order in Tijuana. At 9 PM there was a knock on the door. Ten of the injured immigrants with bandages still on their heads asked if they could stay at the shelter. After they had been released from the hospital, they were deported to Tijuana and the police had told them about the shelter. As we got the men settled into their dormitory space, I asked them. "Why did you risk so much to cross the border?" Miguel spoke first: "In Oaxaca our farm failed and there was nothing to eat; there are no jobs in our area and I asked myself: "Would God want me to watch my five children die of hunger?" And I knew the answer to that question had to be 'No!' That I had to do everything I could to feed my family."

The hope for survival and a better life that pushes so many immigrants north is told with passion and depth by Ruben Martinez in *Crossing Over*. Beginning with the tragic car accident that kills three brothers of the Chavez family in Temecula, California, Martinez takes us back to their home town of Cheran, Michoacan. There we meet the Chavez brothers' family members, the local priest, the doctor, *la curandera* (healer) and the hundreds who pass through the town plaza wondering if their time for going north has come. "From the migrants perspective," Martinez insists, "the Chavez brothers and the thousands of other migrants who have died over the past decade in car wrecks or by drowning or from exposure have become martyrs in a cause: to have the freedom to move. Like Indian Joads, they have fled the Mexican dust bowl." But the martyrdom of the Chavez brothers has changed everything for their family in Cheran. Each one must ask if the decision to go north pays homage to the 3 brothers or only increases the anxiety of those left behind wondering if they made it across. *Crossing Over* is the book I have been waiting for for more than a decade to tell the story of what pushes folks to leave their home, the struggles they find in crossing the border, and what happens to them when they arrive. Martinez takes us on a journey to discover that two towns—Cheran, Michoacan and Warren, Arkansas that never had anything in common or any communication with each other are now bound in an intricate relationship of immigration. Warren is forever changed by the culture, language, traditions and values brought by the folks from Michoacan. And Cheran is totally transformed by the silver SUVs, radios, hip-hop music and new cash that

the migrants bring back from Warren. Martinez shows us the contradiction between the rhetoric of globalization that purports to eliminate borders and the reality of new fences and new border security that have made the human border at the US-Mexico line impenetrable.

But the greatest treasure that Martinez uncovers is the resilient spirit of the Chavez family and the people of Cheran who refuse to give up hope. He makes friends with immigrants at meat packing plants in Minnesota and with tough kids in the underground tunnels of Tijuana. These rich stories offer the readers our own opportunity to cross over new bridges to make visible the hidden lives of those who provide the food for our tables but often do not make enough to feed their own children.

Ramirez worries what will sustain the bold spirit of these immigrants in a new land. Will their new home with its thousand distractions be a source of new life for them or be the eternal reminder that they have no solid place to call home ever again? These are the questions that Daniel Groody also struggles with in his *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit*. Groody uses the Aztec symbol of the heart, the symbol of wisdom, courage and compassion, to reveal the spiritual journey of immigrants who arrive in the United States with *corazones destrozados* (crushed hearts) that have the capacity to become *corazones animados* (rehabilitated and animated). Through a retreat experience in Coachella, California, that uses the symbols of Mexican culture, the immigrants are invited into a new way of looking at themselves and their faith:

While the journey of immigration is a way of the cross, and the retreat an experience of resurrection, the spiritual transformation of these people becomes an ongoing Pentecost experience. As they experience the Spirit of God in the depths of their hearts, they become empowered to invite others into that same Spirit. In the midst of their poverty, they discover the riches of friendships. In place of exploitation, they find dignity and self-worth. In place of utter disregard, they find care and compassion. In place of individualism, they find family and solidarity.

One of the richest parts of *Border of Death, Valley of Life* is the new translation of the Our Lady of Guadalupe-Juan Diego story that Groody presents. When Juan Diego hears the Virgin's voice, he is in the land of his ancestors. He is at his spiritual home. And this Indigenous woman addresses him as "Dignified Juan." Juan's decision to go to the bishop and tell the story reveals the power of the Incarnation. Juan Diego, rejected and uneducated, receives his first spiritual mission by the calling of his name as someone made in God's image. The spiritual journey that follows from this calling grounds his whole life.

While Groody ushers us into the heart of these spiritual awakenings that lead immigrants to a new self-worth, I was sorry that he didn't give us a final chapter about the remarkable history of immigrants who have worked to create social change that benefits all. Just as César Chávez's United Farm Workers Union had its base in the spiritual strength of the *Cursillo* Retreats, thousands of immigrants who have participated in retreats like the ones Groody describes have written letters, visited legislators, registered voters and organized to pass legislation to benefit immigrant students. These may be the *corazones comunitarios* (community hearts) that bring the Gospel to the streets, markets, courtrooms, and senate chambers.

When Sandra Cisneros described Martinez as “our true coyote” in her review of *Crossing Over*, she understood that Martinez was taking us along, kicking and screaming, through journeys that led to destinations of anxiety and uncertainty. Groody offers us an oasis on this trek that allows immigrants to uncover the richest part of their spirituality to make a home in the new land, to bridge them to the old land, and to write a new chapter of American life along the border. Both these insights came to me recently as we commemorated the deaths of unidentified immigrants who died crossing the border in Imperial County, California. More than 290 who died with no name are buried in the cemetery in Holtville under the names of John Doe and Jane Doe. We went to the cemetery on the feast of St. Francis, the patron of the poor, to place flowers and celebrate the lives of these unknown brothers and sisters, insisting that before God’s eyes and our own, they are not forgotten. The decision to remember these lives and the borders that lead to their deaths may be the most genuine gesture we can give to the tragedy and hope of the immigrants that Martinez and Groody have painted for us.

ED DUNN, *OFM*
San Diego, California