

THE WAY

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Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). 0 7425 2241 5, pp. xvi + 192, £18.95 (\$24.95 US).

Daniel G. Groody CSC, an assistant professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, has worked closely during the past fifteen years with Mexican immigrants living in the United States, especially along the US-Mexican border. His experience has pushed him to examine more closely how the immigrants typically relate to God, and to study the values emerging from those relationships. This thoughtful and moving book, written with both scholarly care and pastoral commitment, documents the suffering, hope and spirituality of poor Mexican immigrants in the United States. You will not need to be a specialist to learn much from it: it evokes the humanity and humility of honest people as they search for better, more dignified lives.

To develop his analysis and discussion of Mexican spirituality and conversion, Groody focuses particularly on the work of the Valley Missionary Program, a Roman Catholic organization located in the Coachella Valley, Southern California. The Program addresses the personal struggles and spiritual aspirations of Mexican immigrants and others who come to it for guidance. Groody examines the Program itself and the spiritual-cultural setting of the immigrants. He looks at how the immigrants move through a four-day retreat called the Missionary Encounter, before finally reflecting on the theological principles implicit in the retreat and in their different personal responses.

The retreat changes the lives of all, leaders and participants alike. It provides immigrants with a space in which to take time from their busy lives and encounter God. Sixty people work on the retreat as team members; sixty are there as participants.

Groody's direct experience of the reality he describes, and his academic gifts, lend a rare authority to his writing. At every point you can feel his admiration, respect and love for these vulnerable people—people who have suffered violations of mind and body before, during and after their journeys north, and yet triumph over hardships most of us cannot imagine. As Virgilio Elizondo eloquently and correctly notes in the foreword, Groody's is not a '... hollow idealism, but rather a genuine "pathos" for the people'.

Groody points out the irony in the so-called 'illegal status' of a great number—calculated by some to be close to 5 million—of Mexican immigrants in the US. For the truth is that the US both wants and needs this population in order to support the economy. The book made me examine the limits of my own understanding and appreciation for how these poor immigrants live—and indeed die. Both the media and public opinion, Groody rightly points out, are partial in their treatment of different immigrant groups. Between 1961 and 1989, eighty people were killed trying to cross the Berlin Wall into West Germany, and were considered heroes in the United States. By contrast, over 2,000 poor Mexicans have died between 1995 and 2002 while fleeing from poverty,

political strife, and ongoing violence; and yet these refugees are often seen as insignificant, even as criminals. Any sensitive reader will be jolted by such comparisons, and challenged to take responsibility for analyzing and criticizing the ways in which convention encourages us to think.

Groody did not simply read reports of what happens along the US-Mexican border to poor immigrants. Instead he personally met and spoke with immigration officials, with paid smugglers, and especially with immigrants, whether in detention facilities or elsewhere. He not only documents his findings in the way proper to a research report, but also weaves the voices of the immigrants into all of the chapters in the book. We hear and feel the fear, loneliness, shame and hope of the immigrants. We are humbled by their humility and by their strength.

Many who come in contact with poor immigrants have one-dimensional perceptions of them, both positive and negative. Either immigrants are the hard workers who do jobs that no one else is willing to do, or else they have come to take away our own livelihoods, and might even be criminals. Groody's book moves us beyond these stereotypes. It gracefully portrays the depth and humanity to be found in Mexican immigrants. This invisible population comes provocatively alive for us. We learn much too about a fine and creative retreat programme, and are left hoping that it can spread to wherever people have suffered from similar hardship, isolation and fear.

Anna Marie Gallagher