



CNS PHOTO BY MAGGIE BURNETT, CATHOLIC VISION

The Rev. Rene Castañeda talks with a group of Mexican migrants in Altar, in the state of Sonora, Mexico, in mid-May. People sometimes wait for days for a ride to the U.S. border.

# Spirituality on the Western Front

– BY DANIEL G. GROODY –

**H**E WAS STANDING on the side of a rural road in Southern Arizona, about 50 miles from the Mexican border, where the Sonoran desert is dry, desolate and deadly. As I drove by, I could see he was holding up an empty water jug in his hand, asking for help. I kept driving for the next mile, but thought of the man every inch of the way.

A few years earlier, when I was driving with a friend who was particularly known for his magnanimity and hospitality, we passed by a similar stranger on the road. My friend said, “You know, I never take chances with people like that.” A bit puzzled, I said, “What do you mean?” He continued, “That’s Jesus in that person over there, and you can’t fool around when you see someone in need like that. To neglect him is to neglect God. So we turned around and helped him.” With this in mind, I also turned my car around and worked my way back to attend to this stranded individual. There was little mystery as to

**DANIEL G. GROODY, C.S.C.**, an assistant professor of theology and the assistant director of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Rowman and Littlefield).

who he was; I had no fear that he might be a clandestine serial killer in a hitchhiker's disguise. He was simply an immigrant who had just walked 50 miles across the deadly desert and ran out of water.

It was not by accident that I came across this man. I had gone to the desert looking for people like him, wanting to talk to immigrants after they made the dangerous, harrowing trek across the Mexican-American border. During my encounters with them in detention centers, hospitals, shelters, train stations, deserts, mountains and along rivers and highways, they shared their stories, their struggles and, above all, their spirituality.

The Gospel passage Mt 25:31-46, which is often titled "Judgment of the Nations," is a challenging text through which to read these narratives and look at the issue of immigration. In this passage, Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." The corollaries to the immigrant experience are striking. Hungry in their homelands, thirsty in the treacherous deserts they cross, naked after being robbed at gunpoint by *bandito* gangs, sick in the hospitals from heat-related illnesses, imprisoned in immigration detention centers and finally, if they make it across, estranged in a new land, they bear many of the marks of the crucified Christ in our world today. In light of Matthew 25, immigrants provide one of the most striking instances of Christ's presence in our country.

As I got closer, however, I began to feel a little nervous, not because of any fear for my personal safety, but because of the legal complexities involved in helping immigrants. Any act of hospitality nowadays, especially in this part of the country, was going to be complicated. I quickly found myself not only on the border between Mexico and the United States but also on the border between civil and natural law—between national security and human insecurity and between citizenship and discipleship. The border is a challenging place to sort out the demands of obedience, but in the face of those desperately in need, it is also a fertile place of revelation.

If this man was like 98 percent of the immigrants who come across the border illegally, he was not a drug dealer, a criminal or a terrorist. Like most, he was a man pinned down by human misery, whose goal was simply to pry himself off the ground in order to make enough money to feed his family. As one immigrant named Xavier explained, "I don't even want to leave Mexico. I am not trying to get rich; I simply don't have enough to feed my family anymore. I only make three dollars a day, and all we can buy is tortillas and beans. Migration is a matter of survival for us." Like others, he realized that immigrating to America gives his family hope for bread and honest work, but it will also criminalize him in the process.

As I pulled over to the side of the road, this stranded man was winded and weathered, and his voice weak and weary because he had gone days without food and a day without water. After I offered him something to drink, he said his name was Manuel. Others like him had walked across this snake- and scorpion-infested desert, where summer daytime temperatures can exceed 120 degrees. He is one of thousands who try to cross daily, who walk for four days in a no man's land, trying to avoid detection by the Border Patrol. Since Operation Gatekeeper and similar border-control initiatives started in 1994, migrants have been diverted into more dangerous areas like the Sonoran Desert in order to make it into the United States. Desperate in their misery, they are forced to travel through hellish territory in order to get a job in America that, ironically, no one else wants: doing stoop labor in scorching fields, de-boning chicken in poultry plants, cleaning bathrooms in restaurants and other such menial work.

**BUT MANUEL WAS ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES.** He was not one of the more than 2,500 who have died in the last nine years by drowning in rivers, freezing in the mountains, overheating in the deserts or suffocating in tractor trailers. Despite attempts to deter migrants, they keep coming even when the risks increase. Until economic conditions change in Mexico, border-control policies will do little to stem the tide of immigrants who are struggling to survive. Even while the United States needs and profits from undocumented labor, most immigrants grasp for the remnants of human dignity amid multiple levels of poverty, discrimination and exploitation. In perplexing simplicity, an immigrant named Julio said: "I need the work. You need the workers. Why are you making it so difficult for us to come across the border and work for you?"

After Manuel's long trek across the desert, however, his first words to me were, "I just want to turn myself into the Border Patrol." After looking death in the face, he wanted to exchange his freedom for a ticket back to Mexico. He said he started with a few friends, but after two days, he had trouble keeping pace with them, so they left him behind. His friends knew he would get lost and probably die, but they left him anyway.

His story seemed all too similar to that of another immigrant I met named Sebastian, who came within an hour of dying of heat stroke.

After two days without food and a day without water. I got disoriented and desperate. I had to resort to drinking out of feeding troughs of the desert livestock, and then I had to drink my own urine and even that of the animals. Beyond my exhaustion, my body started doing crazy things. I couldn't hear right and I had this loud, buzzing sound in my head. I felt dizzy and had terrible headaches. Blisters covered my feet, and

then my arms and legs began to feel numb. My throat swelled up, and my heart began to beat real slowly, until everything felt like it was moving in slow motion. Everything turned black and white, and, at that moment, all I wanted to do was die, for I felt only death could liberate me from my suffering.

When asked why he risked death in the desert, he said, "My need is great. The fact is, I'm already dead in Mexico. By going through the desert, I have a chance to live, even if I die."

As Manuel shared his sufferings, the marks of the crucified Lord began to emerge more clearly. He experienced an economic crucifixion as a poor man. He experienced a political crucifixion as an "illegal alien" (with such dehumanizing terminology, he felt he had more in common with extraterrestrials than with U.S. citizens). He experienced a legal crucifixion as a border crosser. He also endured a cultural crucifixion in his separation from home and country. And he underwent a social crucifixion in his piercing loneliness, because of which—separated from his wife and children—he feared being no one to anybody.

But what was most striking was Manuel's testimony to hope. Amid his trials, he depended more than anything else on his relationship with God. He said, "You know, my friends abandoned me in the desert. I thought they were my friends, but they really weren't." With tears in his eyes, he continued, "I've learned that God is the one and only friend who will never abandon me. He was the only one with me in the desert when everything else was taken away." Manuel then went on to recall that the desert was the place where Jesus went, a place where he waged war with the devil. He said, "The desert was the place where Jesus spent 40 days and where he was tempted."


"What temptations did you experience out there?" I asked. "For me, the greatest temptation was simply to give up, to allow myself to die in the middle of the desert, to stop fighting," he said. "And you know at times I simply wanted to die, because it would have been easier for me. But then I saw in my mind the faces of my kids who I left for in the first place, and I knew they were too young to be alone, and they kept me going."

His insight into the Scriptures intrigued me, so I asked if there were other passages that gave him hope. "What gave me strength," Manuel said, "was the Book of Job. He was a guy who lost everything: his friends, his family, his livestock, his house and his health. Job's story is my story. I've lost everything, and about all I have learned is how to suffer. But in Job's case, he never cursed God. And I've always been inspired by him, because I want to be faithful to God as Job was, even with all my struggles."

Another immigrant, María, spoke in a similar way. She

had come north from Guatemala because her family had no money for badly needed medication. She twice tried to cross into the United States. On both occasions she ran out of food and water. The second time, she started throwing up and was on the verge of heat stroke. Twice she was apprehended by the border patrol. Once she was robbed at gunpoint by gangs. And once someone attempted to rape her.

After all she endured in the three weeks since she left home, I asked her what she would say to God if she had 15 minutes to talk to God in person. She looked at me askance, as if I were totally out of it. She said, "First of all, I don't have 15 minutes. God is always with me and I am always talking with God. But if I could see God face to face, the first thing I would do is thank God, for I have been given so much. Everything I am is a gift from God, and God has been so good to me."

Immigrants like Manuel, Xavier, Julio, Sebastian and María reveal a power of life that is stronger than the many dimensions of death that oppress them. One of the great marvels of God is that such hope springs forth amid great suffering. Immigrants not only compel us toward the works of mercy of Matthew 25, but challenge us to discover a spirit of divine gratuity where most of us would tend to see only despair and abandonment. Their stories call us not only to reach out to those in need, but also to find God in the most unlikely places. 

### The Certificate in

## *Spiritual Direction*

An intensive one-week of study held annually in a four-year program with home study.

*(A Certificate in Spirituality is also available for those whose ministry does not require a Certificate in Spiritual Direction.)*

#### Now in three locations:

Vero Beach, Florida February 15-21, 2004

Villa Maria, Pennsylvania June 6-12, 2004

Fairfield, Connecticut July 11-17, 2004



5151 Park Avenue, Fairfield, Connecticut 06825-1000 USA

For more information

call: (203) 371-7867

fax: (203) 365-4798

email: reaps@sacredheart.edu

http://reaps.sacredheart.edu

In Florida (Vero Beach Program): Call the Center for Spiritual Care (772) 567-1233, ext. 3



# America

## 2003 Christmas Appeal

**I**n past years, **America's** readers have been generous contributors to our annual Christmas Appeal. Without the support we receive from you each holiday season, we would not be able to sustain our strong commitment to journalistic excellence.

May we count on your generosity again this Christmas?

By responding to Father Reese's direct appeal, you will help us meet our most immediate and pressing financial needs and allow us to remain a source of spiritual nourishment for all thinking Catholics.

We strongly urge all of our Associates to match or exceed their previous donations. We also encourage each of our readers to join us in celebrating **America's** unique contribution to Catholic intellectual life by becoming a contributing Associate.

Regardless of the size of your donation, we will greatly appreciate whatever level of participation you can manage. You will assist our present efforts and help to guarantee our future.

Please respond today by sending your check to:

**America**  
Development Office  
106 West 56th Street  
New York, NY 10019-3803

To make a donation with your credit card, go to the "Donation" page found on [www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org) and follow the instructions.

**More than 90 Years of Journalistic Excellence**