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# MIGRATION IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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*concilium* 

## Dying to Live: The Undocumented Immigrant and the Paschal Mystery

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### Introduction

The relationship between Christian faith and global migration presents us with three interrelated levels of engagement and analysis: (1) the pastoral level, (2) the spiritual level, and (3) the theological level. The pastoral level considers the basic response *to* immigrants and how people reach out to those on the move in order to meet their basic needs and advocate for structural reform. The spiritual level looks at the internal processes *of* immigrants and how they grow in their journey with God and see it as a source of healing, empowerment, and generative activity. The theological level looks at the notion of migration as a central concept that offers a way of thinking about our relationship with God and what it means to be human in the world. All three of these levels take shape within the framework of personal, communal, and societal narratives, some of which generate love, liberation, and life, and others that result in diminishment, dehumanization, and death.

In this essay I will explore how the narrative of the gospel functions in transforming the stories of a people along the US/Mexican border and specifically how ritual functions in this process. To illustrate I will focus on three communities and their rituals along the borderlands, which function as challenging and prophetic critiques of the prevailing cultural narrative. These communities, which find their inspiration in the gospel narrative, help tell a story that differs from the current socio-political milieu and one that brings to the forefront the vision of the gospel. My argument is that, while contemporary social narratives for immigrants are shaped by a life/death story line, these specific Christian communities along the border are finding ways to bring out a death/life narrative, one that re-describes the world and what it means to live in it.<sup>1</sup>

## I. The life/death narrative of immigration

Immigration as it is being experienced in the United States and many other parts of the world deals with the hope for life on the one hand and the experience of death on the other. It is a complex issue that relates not only to political boundaries but also to the borders between national security and human insecurity, sovereign rights and human rights, civil law and natural law, and citizenship and discipleship. While people have been migrating to the United States for centuries, the journey has become much more dangerous in recent years. More restrictive border policies intensified in 1994, but the events of 9/11 led to an even greater militarization of the border. Forced to cross in remote areas to avoid detection, migrants now are taking greater risks to get into the United States. They are also dying in greater numbers. Currently more than one immigrant each day dies crossing the border from heat stroke, heat exhaustion, hypothermia, vehicular accidents, drowning, and many other causes. Yet even if they make it across successfully, they face inner challenges caused not only by moving from one geographical place to another but also by moving from a place of connectedness to disconnectedness, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from their homeland to a foreign land, which many experience as a movement from life to death.

Amidst this life/death narrative, there are places where a different story is being written into the fabric of a culture. This new story is taking shape often in the margins of society, away from the big cities, in places of relative obscurity. The people of this story not only offer help, healing, and hope to people on the move, but they also offer alternative ways of living, moving, and being in the world. Humane Borders in Southern Arizona gives us a way of understanding the pastoral response to immigrants through rituals of service; the Valley Missionary Program in Southern California helps us understand the spirituality of immigrants through rituals of sharing, and an annual Eucharistic celebration near El Paso in Texas, and Juárez in Sonora, Mexico, reveals an important vantage point on a theology of migration through rituals of solidarity. Each offers a way of speaking about a God of life in the midst of what John Paul II referred to as 'a culture of death.' In a society dominated by the powerful, these communities give insight into the meaning of the Paschal mystery in light of the global reality of migration.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Rituals of service: the story of Humane Borders

Various groups along the US/Mexican border are responding to the human needs of immigrants, but one organization in particular offers valuable insight into the pastoral level of immigration. Headquartered in Tucson, Arizona, the central mission of Humane Borders is to provide a simple drink of water to thirsty migrants crossing the deserts of the American Southwest.<sup>3</sup> It fulfils this mission through one daily ritual, namely, that of deploying and maintaining water tanks in the deserts. They are placed along remote routes of travel where migrants have to walk as many as 50 miles in temperatures that can exceed 120 degrees in the summer.

Humane Borders is a faith-based organization that works to create a just and compassionate border environment. It was founded on 11 June 2000, shortly after an eighteen-year-old mother named Yolanda González García died after giving her last drop of water to her infant child, who survived. The deaths of thousands of migrants in the years that followed motivated the organization to put water tanks in the desert to help migrants who would die without them.

The central logo of Humane Borders is the big dipper and the North Star. It incorporates the 'drinking gourd' from the slavery abolitionist movement and water pouring from the dipper to symbolize Humane Borders' life-giving mission. It does not require people to affiliate with any particular religious denomination or faith, but it clearly draws its inspiration from Matthew 25:31-46, the gospel mandate to care for the least of society, as well as Isaiah 49:10, which says, 'They shall not hunger or thirst, nor shall the scorching wind or the sun strike them; For he who pities them leads them and guides them beside springs of water.'

The primary interest is not doctrinal but behavioural. As its founder Rev. Robin Hoover notes, 'The focus is on the migrant, not theology.'<sup>4</sup> Yet at the same time he recognizes that theology motivates many people of the organization and is central to writing the story lines of a better world. Humane Borders draws from the priestly, kingly, and prophetic traditions of the Christian Scriptures, and it uses the parable of the Good Samaritan as one of the governing narratives of the organization (Luke 10:25-37). In Hoover's words:

The story highlights the prophetic ideal in challenging all people to see the common, human ties each person shares with his or her neighbour. It

highlights the kingly ideal in calling all people to be ruled by love and compassion, which manifests itself in caring for the injured person found on the side of the road. It highlights the priestly function of inviting all people to engage in actions that build community, which includes binding up the wounds of the injured. For us, this priestly, kingly, and prophetic ministry manifests itself not only in individual acts of charity but in a collective effort of outreach aimed at assisting those who are most vulnerable in our society, which means assisting migrants in the desert.<sup>5</sup>

The 10,000 volunteers of Humane Borders have logged more than 40,000 hours of service, dispensed more than 100,000 gallons of water, driven more than 225,000 miles, and have made more than 2600 trips to the desert, including some trips that are more than 300 miles in length.<sup>6</sup> In addition to direct aid, Humane Borders also lives out its mission through legislative advocacy for undocumented workers, as well as efforts that foster better economic conditions in Mexico. Drawing people together from many faith traditions and humanitarian concerns, they gather every day to repeat the same ritual of delivering water to migrants in the deserts, with the common hope, as Hoover says, of 'taking death out of the immigration equation.'<sup>7</sup>

### **III. Rituals of sharing: the story of the Valley Missionary Program**

The Valley Missionary Program is a Catholic outreach programme aimed at addressing deeper hungers of the human heart that help heal, empower, and reconcile those who have gone through the trauma of immigration and face various levels of discrimination in a new society. Located in the agricultural region of the Coachella Valley of southern California, the organization is a lay-clerical association composed almost entirely of Mexican immigrants.<sup>8</sup> It was founded by the late Fr Joseph Pawlicki, CSC, who recognized that many of the immigrants there not only struggled economically and politically but also socially and spiritually. For two decades he went out into the migrant camps and some of the remote farms to offer small, 'barrio' Masses. In time he recognized the need for more sustained approaches that assist migrants. He began by offering various Cursillo retreats, but over time he worked with the immigrants to create a retreat programme of their own that corresponds to the spiritual needs of those who come across the border.

The programme is organized around a four-day 'Missionary Encounter'

retreat. The central activities, talks, and services are varied, but at their core they are rituals of sharing. These rituals provide a space to deal with the pain that stems from losing a friend in the desert, leaving children behind, learning a new language, undergoing countless indignities, and, in various ways, feeling one is nobody to anybody. Migrants struggle not only with the physical demands of working at '3D jobs' (so called because they are difficult, demanding, and dangerous) but also with leaving families behind, saying goodbye to their homeland, and entering into a foreign culture. They are constantly reminded that they have less education, less money, and less social status in American society, in other words, that they are inferior and disposable. Such messages of exclusion and rejection only deepen the cultural sense of woundedness in the heart, which causes a branding on the soul that, as Virgilio Elizondo notes, is 'worse and more permanent than a branding of the master's mark with a hot iron on the face.'<sup>9</sup> Migrating into these inner areas of a person may at times be more difficult than a physical journey because it means moving beyond fragile self-confidence into the painful territories of the heart and soul.

Collectively the rituals help create an alternative world by forming an alternative community, which also opens the migrants up to the possibilities of an authentic divine-human encounter. The team that organizes the retreat helps bring out the inner value, human dignity, and spiritual hunger of each participant through rituals that are communally-focused, culturally-rooted, and Christ-centred. The figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe also figures predominately in the retreat, alongside the story of Juan Diego, through which migrants see God's favour toward someone living in and empowered from a marginal social location like themselves.

More than sixty volunteers, who are migrants themselves, prepare for months in advance in order to provide a retreat in which the participants are served exquisitely prepared foods and then waited upon day and night in order to communicate in word and deed that they are loved by God and welcomed and appreciated for who they are as human beings. They share common sleeping quarters, common meals, and a common space where they can create small communities by sharing their stories and seeking insight into them through more in-depth reflection on the gospel story. Many of these communities continue long after the retreat is over, and some have been in existence for over thirty-five years. These communities have various rituals of their own where the migrants are invited to talk about who they are, what they have experienced, and how the scriptures speak to their lives.

While space does not permit a more extensive discussion of the process and the spirituality of the immigrants of this organization, the rituals of the retreat foster religious, social, affective, moral, and socio-political conversion that heals, empowers, and creates Christian community that humanizes and liberates. It also facilitates an identity-shift that helps the migrants see their lives not only in terms of an economic migration but a pilgrimage or spiritual migration that engages them to move outward toward others and invite them into a community centred on friendship with Christ, others, and the Kingdom of God. It offers an important example of an inculturated evangelization that roots their spiritual experience within the particular ethos of a people but at the same time joins them to a larger, more universal experience of what it means to live out their catholic faith.

#### **IV. Rituals of solidarity: the Eucharist at the Mexican-American border**

In a remote, dry, and rugged area near El Paso and Juárez – where many immigrants try to cross the border and some lose their lives – bishops, priests, deacons, and hundreds of other people gather every year on both sides of the border to celebrate the Eucharist. Chronologically, this takes place each year in the beginning of November. Culturally, it happens at the time of the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico. Liturgically, it happens around the feast of All Saints and All Souls. As at other Masses, participants pray and worship together. Unlike other liturgies, a sixteen-foot iron fence divides this community in two, with one half in Mexico, the other half in the United States, and an altar joining them in the middle. This ritual is one of the most powerful testimonies along the border of God's universal, undivided, and unrestricted love for all people, and it speaks of the gift and challenge of Christian faith and the call to feed the world's hunger for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

This Eucharist leaves much room for reflection, but here I want to highlight three aspects that help offer a central vantage point on a theology of migration. First of all, this Eucharist celebrates the common bonds that people share as members of the body of Christ. It names the truly catholic nature of the Eucharist by uniting people beyond the political constructions that divide them. In celebrating the spiritual union of the people of God, it acknowledges that there is only one God, one Father, one baptism, one redeemer, and one cross that saves humankind. As Bishop Ricardo Ramírez

noted at the November 2007 celebration, 'There is no symbol in reality stronger than the Eucharist to express the unity of the body of Christ.'

Second, this Eucharist reveals that the God of Jesus Christ crosses borders. It reveals the God who seeks to overcome all that divides and excludes by reaching out to all people regardless of their political, economic, or social standing. It communicates that God's compassion for humanity is not limited by political policies and that the mercy of God that is offered as a gift and received in faith also makes moral demands on those who receive it. This same spirit led John Paul II to advocate a globalization without marginalization or 'globalization of solidarity.'<sup>10</sup>

Third, this Eucharist reminds us that through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has broken down the wall of enmity between human beings (Eph. 2.14). The Paschal mystery brings out that, even as human beings erect barriers of every sort, God walls off no one from the divine embrace. The Mass celebrates the absolute gratuity of God, who crossed over even the borders of sin and death in order to restore people to right relationships. As a memory of reconciliation, the Eucharist calls people, individually and collectively, to conversion, especially for sins that divide, exclude, and oppress the poor. In his prayer at the border Mass, co-president Bishop Ramírez noted:

I ask God to forgive our country for not welcoming the immigrant. I ask God to forgive us for those who have died crossing the border. I ask God to forgive the hunger and the thirst that the immigrants suffer and all the dangers that they find in the desert. I ask God to forgive this country for the lack of just and compassionate immigration laws. I ask God to forgive us for the separation and division that result because of cruel legislation. I ask God to forgive us because of the plans to construct a wall that will be more than 700 miles long. That wall will be a symbol of the lack of the spirit of hospitality on behalf of our country.

This Eucharist reminds people that the walls which divide, and which Christ came to overcome, have already begun to crumble, and that this new age of reconciliation has already begun, even as Christians wait for its ultimate fulfilment when Jesus comes again.



## V. Rewriting of the cultural imagination: from death to life

From a distance, the impact of the rituals of Humane Borders, the Valley Missionary Program, and the Border Eucharist may seem relatively small and insignificant. Given the reality of more than 200 million people on the move, 75 million of which are migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people, even the collective efforts of all three of these groups appear to amount to little.<sup>11</sup> As valid as this observation may be, they offer nonetheless small mustard seeds of hope and prophetic parables through which the narratives of a culture are being rewritten and the Paschal mystery is being realized along a deadly border. In contrast to social narratives that demean, degrade, and result in the death of the migrant, the narratives of these communities highlight the dignity of the human person, the needs of the human heart, and the promises of the gospel.

Humane Borders challenges the prevailing narratives of American culture by examining not only what kind of world we live in but what kind of world we want to become. Alongside the contemporary preoccupation with the economic, social, and political costs of migration, it brings to the forefront its human costs and reminds us that the economy is made for human beings and not human beings for the economy.<sup>12</sup> In addition to looking at the price paid by immigrants, it looks at the price paid by ignoring them. The Valley Missionary Program looks not only at meeting the physical needs of the migrant but their spiritual needs as well. It recognizes that only God, through the redemptive love of Christ, can accomplish the deepest liberation in human beings, bring about reconciliation on all levels of our relationships, and fulfil the deepest aspirations of the human heart. The Eucharist at the border challenges the idols of a dehumanizing money-theism, racializing provincialism, and alienating nationalism that deny support and hospitality to some of the world's most vulnerable members. It names the interconnect-edness of the body of Christ and the challenge of going beyond barriers in order to promote a global community marked by justice and peace.<sup>13</sup> There are other organizations and other rituals along the border, but my focus here has been to highlight some rituals of service, sharing, and solidarity that communicate compassion, community, and Christian revelation.

As varied and diverse as these organizations are, their rituals are grounded in one fundamental story, namely, the Passover-narrative, and by extension, the Paschal mystery. The immigrant journey itself has many striking parallels with the Exodus story and the Christian story. Crying out for

liberation from oppressive conditions of poverty, immigrants cross bodies of waters, traverse large stretches of desert, face the relentless pursuit of authorities, and journey in hope toward a promised land. The journey of immigrants is also a way of the Cross, yet their spirituality compels them in hope of a better life through the power of a compassionate God. The Passover narrative and the Paschal mystery are a comfort to those who suffer because they help them see their story in the biblical story.

But to those of affluence and influence, who benefit from the privileges of empire and yet are deaf to the cry of the poor, this story calls into question the values and priorities of society which too quickly ignore or discard migrants and degrade or diminish their human dignity. The Passover narrative viewed in the light of the death/life narrative invites people to adopt a different way of life, an alternative set of priorities, and a more life-giving value system, one re-imagined in light of the gospel that gives priority to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. The moral demands of the immigrant invite us not only to remember the Passover narrative but to undergo a narrative Passover, which means learning to live out a different story by seeing Christ in the eyes of the immigrant and seeing the immigrant with the eyes of Christ.

### Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, 'That the World May Be Redescribed,' *Interpretation* 54, no. 4 (2002): 359–67.
2. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, no. 63.
3. Robin Hoover, 'The Story of Humane Borders,' in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, p. 162.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
5. *Ibid.*,
6. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
8. For more on the Valley Missionary Program, see Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.
9. Virgilio Elizondo, 'Culture, the Option for the Poor, and Liberation,' in *Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p. 164.
10. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, no. 55.

11. For more on these statistics, see 'Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action,' report of the Global Commission on International Migration, 2005, available online at [www.gcim.org/attachments/gcim-complete-report-2005.pdf](http://www.gcim.org/attachments/gcim-complete-report-2005.pdf), 83–85.
12. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1986, no. 13. Available online at [http://www.osjspm.org/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx), accessed 12 May 2008.
13. For more on the topic of globalization and theology see Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007.