

# REACHING BEYOND BORDERS

## Encounter with Migrants Reinforces Importance of Justice

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Photography by **Rev. Mike Connors, C.S.C.**

“The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.” This was our sung responsorial psalm during our Masses together at the Mexico/USA border. This same psalm echoed throughout our trip on the border and continues to echo for me each day as I remember our very real encounters with the living Christ, in our interactions with the migrants and their advocates.

Prompted by a grant last year from Notre Dame Vocation Initiatives (NDVI) to explore law as vocation, I got together with Rev. Mike Connors, C.S.C., director of the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program at Notre Dame, to learn how he helps students to recognize and develop their vocations in ministry. This process was new to me since I came upon my vocation quite by chance. I spent 10 years as a products-liability and antitrust trial attorney working for big corporate clients and famous people, in big cities, litigating high-profile, textbook cases in federal court. I never saw my profession as anything other than an interesting but extremely stressful job. I never felt the satisfaction that I had anticipated while studying law. As a result, throughout those 10 years I knew there had to be something more. It was within months of beginning work at the Notre Dame Legal Aid Clinic and meeting the clients that I realized that I had at last discovered why I went to law school: I found my vocation in serving the poor and teaching others how to do the same.

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## REFLECTIONS FROM THE BORDER

**Sairah Saeed '04**  
Port Huron, Michigan

For most of us, both divinity and law students, the most educational and enjoyable aspect of our trip to the border of Mexico and Arizona was getting to know, through conversation, each other and the people we met on our journey. What all of us realized along the way was that there were many amazing stories we would never hear: Among the silent voices were the countless men, women, and children who had died because of dehydration, frostbite, exhaustion, or scorpion bites, while trying to cross the desert from Mexico to Arizona.



Among the people we met were a man named Jesus and a priest, Padre (Father) Rene. (I have changed some of the names and places to respect the privacy of the people we met.) Jesus was one of 12 volunteers at the CCAMYN, a community center in Altar, Mexico, which assists migrants preparing to cross the border into the United States and also those who were deported from the United States. When we asked Jesus how and why he worked in the center, he responded, “We assist migrants coming through here, but we are all migrants in life.”

Among the services provided by Padre Rene, Jesus, and the corps of volunteers at the CCAMYN are meals, clothing, assistance for migrants in finding employment, maps and supplies for those taking the trip across the border, and a place for migrants to stay for a few days. People seem to benefit the most from the camaraderie that largely results from a community Mass held every night in the center. A special prayer for the migrants hangs on the wall and is recited every Mass.

When Padre Rene first arrived at the CCAMYN as a deacon, he found, after talking to migrants in the town square, that

in addition to their being made scapegoats for local crimes and other problems, many of them were running from poverty, sometimes being paid as little as \$2.00 for every eight hours of work. He also found that men were primarily the ones attempting to cross the border because

they felt responsible for supporting their families of five or six. These men found that they could make \$5.00 per day in Mexico versus \$5.00 per hour in the United States.

According to Padre Rene’s chats with migrants in Altar’s community, one of the biggest sources of income for people living in Mexico is money coming from family members in the United States. Many people were simply crossing to be with their families. In fact, we met a group of children ranging in age from ages 8 to 18 (six altogether) who were all planning on crossing to meet their parents in Alabama. One of the divinity students, Colleen, noticed with sadness the difference in the realities of our own happy childhoods and the reality of this group of children who would soon be beginning a very dangerous journey and leaving their childhoods behind. Another divinity student, Betsey, pointed out that we might be the last people to see these children alive.

The next day we had the opportunity to speak with some people in Altar’s town square. Some of the students met “coyotes”—usually men who charge a lot of money to help people cross the border. Though some of the people we met told us they had positive experiences with the coyotes, we also heard stories of coyotes who have deserted their groups if they see Border Patrol coming or have left people behind who cannot keep up because of exhaustion or the heat. Coyotes also often do not alert people to

the resources necessary to cross the desert.

Many of the problems in Mexico affect children in an especially harsh way. The next place we visited, the Casa de la Misericordia (the House of Mercy), in Nogales, Mexico, provided serv-

ices mostly for children. A cofounder of the program, Esther, spoke with us and told us about the children’s lunch program that was started 20 years ago. This past year the Casa hosted a Christmas party in which the more than 1,000 children who attended received gifts and candy.

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The question then became how to give students the chance to develop their own sense of vocation while they study law. Recognizing the Catholic Church’s directive to welcome the stranger and the Catholic bishops’ recognition of the Church as an immigrant church, Father Connors and I put together a joint border immersion project that would include law students who were studying immigration law and M.Div. students preparing to minister in this migrant church, all of whom were interested in better defining their vocations. The project would explore the effect that our laws have on migrants and examine the Church’s response to their needs. We chose the border region of Mexico near Nogales, Arizona, and Sonora. Soon we had five law students and our clinic fellow, Becca Houghton, as well as 15 M.Div. students, including three seminarians, interested and willing to go. NDVI, the Institute of Church Life, and the Martin Institute were extremely supportive and generously helped in funding the project.

For eight days we traveled together, worked together, and prayed together—Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim. Everywhere we went we encountered the living God. Our trip began with an evening at Holy Cross’s Brother Andre House in Phoenix, preparing and serving food to 700 homeless men and women and visiting with them as they ate. While in Phoenix, we also visited both St. Gregory’s and St. John Vianney’s, two Holy Cross parishes that minister to migrants and refugees, whose pastors and parishioners spoke of the challenges they face in doing so. We then met up with BorderLinks, a not-for-profit organization that guides border immersion experiences and encourages the examination of the difficult questions, both theological and legal, raised by migration.

Our first destination was Altar, Sonora, a small Mexican village 30 miles from the border. It is a town where migrants from Mexico and Central America gather to prepare to cross the border. Migrants often hire “guides” or “coyotes,” as they are commonly referred to, to get them through the desert that claimed more than 1,300 lives last year. Recently the United States has built walls topped with barbed wire through urban border areas, forcing people seeking a better life into the dangers of the desert and possible death. It was in Altar that we met Father Rene, an incredible man who spent a week sitting in the square listening to the migrants’ needs and imagining ways to respond. He sees the Church as the voice of those without a voice. He quickly gathered his parishioners together, and as a parish they began feeding and sheltering those who were to make their way into the desert, always cautioning them of the dangers. At CCAMYN, the community center the parishioners built, we shared a meal, prepared for us by the parishioners, with a family of nine preparing to cross the desert. There I met Angelica, a 5-year-old, whose mother and father had gone to Alabama two years earlier to earn money so that they could feed their family. They missed each other so much that they could no longer bear the separation. We all asked each other how these little children would make such a dangerous trip. They continue to be in our thoughts and prayers. While

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Most of the children who partake of the daily meals have factory-worker parents who do not have the time to feed the children because they are working most of the time.

Another problem many Mexicans face is an abhorrent work environment. One woman we met, Gabriela, because of her negative experiences in factories, attempts to teach people about the rights they have as workers under Mexican law. Gabriela explained that most people in Nogales left school and went straight to the factories. In one of the factories where she used to work, Gabriela was exposed to silver daily and her eyebrows started falling out. The factory-provided doctor told her it was due to nervousness. She left the factory without saying anything, as most people in the factory did if they decided to leave. Since leaving the factory her eyebrows have grown back.

At her second factory job, Gabriela found out that pregnant women were looked down upon; she met other labor organizers and started learning about her rights. Her supervisor told her to get rid of the “trouble people” trying to organize around the issue, and she decided that she wanted to do labor-organizing work, so she left the factory. Gabriela explained that she does this risky work because “knowledge and learning brings power.”

She now disseminates information about factory workers’ rights that are often infringed upon—for example, the right to go to the bathroom during a work shift and the right to breaks, including lunch. Gabriela explained that the laws currently in place are excellent but not carried out well and are not enforced by the government. For example, there is a minimum wage of 45 pesos (or \$4.50) a day and a rule that people cannot work more than nine hours per week of overtime. Gabriela told us that salaries are often lower than minimum wage and are not enough to even survive on.

Gabriela and her co-organizers provide alternatives to those unhappy with their factory jobs, including working at an in-house job such as a cook or housekeeper, cooking and selling tamales, sewing clothes, or working at a cooperative. In addition, Gabriela and other labor organizers investigate factories and write letters to those running factories.

Gabriela’s family also works to assist people in the area. Her father, a doctor by training, is a pastor at a Presbyterian church in Nogales that serves meals to migrants three times a week and serves as a shelter for migrants. He felt a calling to open up a parish and assist those repeatedly mentioned in the Bible: migrants, foreigners, orphans, and widows. And true to its

mission, the church welcomes everyone. We had a chance at this parish to visit with the men staying in the shelter. One man exclaimed, “It is like the movie; we are *Neither from Here nor There* ... that’s how we are.” Another man stated as a possible solution to the border problem, “Treat us like brothers ... open the door.”

This open-door policy was advocated by Reverend Fife in the 1980s for those who were then fleeing persecution from U.S.-backed wars in El Salvador and Guatemala. A leader in the 1980s of what is now referred to as the Sanctuary Movement, Reverend Fife’s church was the first to declare itself a sanctuary. When the media learned of Reverend Fife’s work, the word spread about those involved in the Latin American wars, “some of the worst torturers in the Western Hemisphere,” and by 1984, 200 congregations of various religious denominations served as public sanctuaries, and hundreds of cities declared themselves as sanctuary cities.

Reverend Fife’s congregation has planted water tanks in the desert between Arizona and Mexico in a project called Humane Borders. His congregation provides emergency medical care or transportation from trucks driven by congregation members through the desert in a program

called Samaritans, and the church provides a place for those crossing to shower twice a week. Reverend Fife is modest about these accomplishments and insists there is more to be done and dreams of opening up a center for day laborers.

The stories of all of these people led us to come back with visions about assisting through prayer, advocacy, and lobbying to change laws, policies, and attitudes. Rebecca Houghton, an attorney at Notre Dame’s Legal Aid Clinic, was adamant about not letting the problems we learned about at the border overwhelm her: “I can’t help everyone in the world, but I can help the person who knocks on my door. ... If I can’t help them I’ll find someone who can.” A divinity student, Rachell Farrell, insisted on our taking responsibility, stating, “We are our government ... we are our church.”

We have already started to implement these ideas in a Mass dedicated to the migrants every Friday in Malloy Hall’s chapel at 12:15. Everyone is welcome. We hope you will all join us in our struggle against injustice.





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in Altar we visited the village square, where we talked to “guides” who assured us that they had made the trip many times. We also met other migrants who feared the trip, but fear of their families dying of hunger was much greater. We heard about the heartache and frustration of being separated from the ones they love for such a long time because they cannot make a living in Mexico.

We quickly understood why it is difficult to provide for a family in Mexico when we visited a supermarket and discovered that food costs as much as it does in the United States, while the *maquilas*, or U.S. factories created after NAFTA took effect, pay their Mexican workers only \$5.00 a day. We met with two remarkable women who are workers’ rights organizers, clandestinely working with laborers in the *maquilas* to improve working conditions, wages, and living standards. When we arrived for our appointment at a *maquila*, we were denied access to the factory, and a U.S. manager admitted that it was not in shape for visitors.

No trip would be complete without a visit to the Border Patrol headquarters, where we saw a movie about the history of the patrol. Although ridealongs are no longer possible after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we were proudly shown the patrol’s full arsenal and their methods of monitoring the border and picking up migrants. Back in Nogales, Sonora, we spent the evening sharing a meal with those who were recently deported back to Mexico, either from U.S. jails or because they were caught in the desert. Many of them also shared their stories of why they left Mexico and how they had been caught. All left Mexico because of the abject poverty they could no longer endure. Reverend Pazos and his wife open their church to those who are returned by Border Patrol and offer them friendship and meals. Reverend Pazos had been a medical doctor who felt called to the ministry and responded generously, giving up a certain lifestyle, to work with the poor and dispossessed. His entire family was at his side, an intrinsic part of his ministry.

Back in Tucson, we were invited to the home of a couple who fled Mexico 10 years before because the government threatened their lives for their labor activities. They have no status in the United States and no chance of getting status because our laws preclude people from applying for asylum after a year of being here. They had no resources when they entered the country to hire an attorney, and their fear of being deported back to certain death continues to make them cautious about seeking help. Despite their undocumented status, they open their home to anyone in need and welcome strangers graciously.

Our last stop was Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, where we met Rev. John Fife, the pastor and one of the founders of the Sanctuary Movement in the ‘80s. He has created a parish community that recognizes that we are all the body of Christ and are called to incarnate the values of the Gospels. His community puts water in the desert and patrols the roads in four-wheel-drive vehicles as good Samaritans with medical equipment to continue to help the migrants, all the while advocating for a more humane

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## REFLECTIONS FROM THE BORDER

### Brendan Wilson '04 Waterloo, Ontario, Canada



*More than 1,200 migrants are dying each year in a desperate attempt to evade capture in the desert.*

Our trip to Arizona and Mexico was significant for a number of reasons. It introduced us to a group of friends and allowed us to meet many people struggling to comfort those hurt by the economic and political forces creating this border crisis. The trip also opened our eyes to the plight of migrants in Mexico and allowed us to see firsthand the effects of NAFTA, America’s border policy, and the desperation of migrant workers that leads them to risk their lives in the desert. Most significantly, though, the trip brought the Gospel to light in a new way. For many of us, it was the first time we had crossed the border and seen the enormous disparity in material wealth between the United States and Mexico. Previously, most of us had read the Gospel and had it interpreted for us only from the perspective of those living on the northern side of the border. Never had we heard

Mexicans speak of their own understanding of the Gospel and their experience of suffering and redemption. It seems so odd that a line drawn through the desert determines who is and who is not entitled to running water, street lights, and paved roads. Along the border, where the developed and developing worlds meet, Christ’s parables seem more poignant. We could see that none of the solutions offered by political leaders had really resolved the problems. While NAFTA had once been seen as the economic solution for Mexico’s ills, it has actually created more suffering for the poor of Mexico and increased the

disparity between the haves and have-nots. Likewise, the promise of legalism, that a set of correctly tailored immigration laws might ease the situation at the border, has also proven false. The number of migrants crossing the border has not decreased despite the more stringent immigration policy now being enforced. Instead, more than 1,200 migrants are dying each year in a desperate attempt to evade capture in the desert.

When faced with the reality of this difficult economic and political issue, it is easy to feel despair given that our macroeconomic solutions to these problems have failed us. Yet the Gospel reminds us that transformation—of ourselves and our communities—requires a change of heart, not a change of our political regime or our economic systems. Jesus speaks first about faith in God, compassion, community, selflessness, and sharing. He speaks to us about the gifts we all have and that we all have a responsibility to share with others. As Mother Teresa rightly told Fidel Castro: “The state may be able to provide many things, but it cannot give love.” In Mexico we learned that we can bring love to those in need—on both sides of the border. Our trip introduced us to many individuals who were living out Christ’s Gospel message to serve our brothers and sisters in need. It was through their lives that we learned that migrants to our nation are not “illegal aliens” or “foreigners.” They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. It became clear that God was challenging us to follow the example of the priests, nuns, and laypeople met during our trip. These individuals had learned to love in an extraordinary way. Perhaps it is the desperation of the situation that evokes in people such extraordinary responses. Those who struggle through hardships are often better able to love others. Sometimes, on this side of the border, where our economic plight is not so bad, it is hard to learn how to love in an extraordinary way because we are rarely confronted with situations of obvious desperation such as those seen along the border. Perhaps, too, it is due to our often failing to realize that we are all spiritual migrants, separated from our true home in God. This trip allowed us to see that reality more clearly and, I pray, inspired us to love all of God’s people in a more extraordinary way.



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border policy that does not force people to their deaths. He believes it is imperative that we all get involved in the suffering of people, always pressing the question of justice. He challenged us to do the same: to hear the cry of the poor and to respond.

Every evening we would gather to celebrate Mass, bringing all those we met that day to our prayers. Together we would share our reflections of the day, learning from each other—lawyers and theologians—where we saw Christ and how to best serve the living God. In our final reflections we agreed to find ways to stay attuned to the poor and the migrant and find ways to respond in our own community and to educate others.

Being back in South Bend has been difficult amid all that we take for granted. But we continue to work together to respond to the call we heard in the desert. As a start, we meet every Friday at noon for Mass at Malloy Hall to pray with Father Rene and his parishioners for those migrants crossing the desert and for those who welcome these strangers. It is still too early to know what seeds were planted during our experience in the desert, and which will germinate. It is our hope that in time this experience will lead to vocations in law or ministry that recognize and respond to the living Christ by recognizing and responding to the cries of the poor.



## REFLECTIONS FROM THE BORDER

### Julissa Robles '04 Lennox, California



No one realized that by signing up for a border immersion experience, they would end up on a life-changing journey. Not only was the trip an opportunity to face the realities of legal structures and living conditions on the border, but it was also an encounter with our faith. Sharing this powerful experience with the Master of Divinity students was a blessing that added a crucial and informed perspective on social justice and our duties as Christians to walk with the poor.

Throughout the trip we expressed a desire to understand the migrants' plight and took every opportunity to challenge each other to pursue alternative avenues of thought on the most difficult issues. Each meal we shared and each presentation we attended was filled with intense questions about the role of faith and law in the migration crisis. While our in-depth analysis of economic dynamics and global issues did not leave us with immediate answers, these conversations were enriching and informative because we had lawyers and theologians at a common table. We also had the opportunity to reflect on our individual choices and the role we play in affecting the economic situation. We walked away wondering how our ministries and legal careers will take shape after such an awakening.

The fruits of our journey have flourished in the shape of various projects that focus on spreading the awareness we gained on our border trip. Divinity students and law students are working on a class presentation to the undergrads that combines our encounters at the border with the concept of vocation. Students are also collaborating on a Sunday Spanish radio show that will offer reflections on the call to justice that we experienced at the border, as well as an explanation of the legal barriers that migrants face daily. Most importantly, the dialogue will continue as we meet to discuss the service role that we must take in our South Bend community to meet the needs of the surrounding immigrant community.

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As law students, we were challenged to realize the power that comes with knowing the law and to consider how this power can be used to serve and change the legal struc-

tures that promote injustice. We learned a great deal from the open hearts of the M.Div. students and are certain that we left a mark on them as well. We found an interesting balance in our analysis of issues by exploring pragmatic legal avenues and consequences, while integrating the values grounded in our faith in our responses. The reality we encountered as law students is that we are called to serve. This is our vocation.

