



Art by Marcy Hall



WOMEN WITNESSES OF MERCY

CELEBRATING THE EXTRAORDINARY WITNESS
OF WOMEN DURING THE YEAR OF MERCY



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“I think we can make present the immigrants themselves, their faces, their stories, so that people can know they are not criminals, that they are people like you and I and that they deserve dignity and respect from all of us.”

Sister
Norma Pimentel

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Crisis at the Border

Since an initial surge in the summer of 2014, tens thousands of immigrants – many of them unaccompanied minors and young women with children – have crossed into the United States border at Texas’s Rio Grande Valley. The majority are from Central America, particularly Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Fleeing horrific gang violence, trying to reunite with family members, and looking for a way to make a living, they immediately surrender themselves to U.S. Border Patrol in the hope that the legal system will allow them to stay.

After detaining these women and children for hours and even days, Border Patrol releases hundreds of immigrant families a day with bus tickets and a ‘notice to appear’ at an immigration hearing. Tired, hungry, dirty, and distraught many of these women and families seek respite at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in downtown McAllen, Texas, where they meet Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

A sister with the Missionaries of Jesus, Sister Norma knew there was more that could be done. “They were just being dropped off at the bus station in heartbreaking conditions,” she

said. And so, in early June 2014 Sister Norma requested permission to set up a way station for immigrant families to receive the physical, spiritual, and emotional care they so desperately needed at Sacred Heart Church – just a few blocks away from the bus station in McAllen. And just a few days later, she opened an additional facility at Brownsville’s Immaculate Conception Cathedral – just a block away from the bus station there.

“¡Bienvenidos!”

Upon arriving at one of the facilities, families are welcomed in their own language with a shout of “Bienvenidos!” and by the applause of Sister Norma’s team of staff and volunteers. “We welcome them with joy and care,” Pimentel says. “It really hits home that they’re now in good hands, and we’re here to take care of them.” Families are matched with a volunteer who takes care of them during their stay at the facility, where they can take a shower, receive medical attention, get new clothing, eat a hot meal, rest, and receive advice about navigating their way in their new surroundings.

“Through the generosity and compassion of many, we were able to provide for their immediate and basic needs...Most importantly, we helped



Sister Norma holds a newborn baby at the center at Sacred Heart Church.

(photo from Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande)

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restore the dignity and respect every human person deserves,” writes Pimentel.

There’s no doubt that Sister Norma’s efforts have made an impact. Today, scores of volunteers run the day-to-day operations of the facilities allowing Sister Norma to work with city and Border Patrol officials.

In January 2015, Sister Norma gave testimony before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission on what she had witnessed during the previous summer. She chose to spend a significant portion of her time addressing the situations for unaccompanied children who arrive at the border. Sister Norma recalled her visit to the overcrowded and ill-equipped facility in McAllen, Texas. “I recall a child begging me, ‘Please take me out of here! I can’t breathe!’ Seeing that child’s face, I can only imagine how scared and frightened they all were.” At one point during the visit, Sister Norma invited some of the fearful and tearful children to pray with her. “It was a powerful experience, so moving, even the officers who witnessed the children’s response commented as I walked out of the cell, “Thank you for helping me to realize they are human beings!,” remembered Sister Norma.

In fact, when asked about the politics of immigration Sister Norma says, “My role and my only interest is for the person, the dignity of the human being.” And so, she has advised local, national and world leaders always raising the need for humanitarian aid and kindness. She has taken her message to the White House and the United Nations in addition to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. In fact, her

work caught the attention of Pope Francis, who made a surprise call to Sister Norma and her team during a filming ABCs “20/20” and singled Pimentel out for her service and dedication to immigrant families.

As the numbers of immigrants from Central America seeking asylum in the United States begins to swell again in the Summer of 2016, U.S. Border Patrol is better equipped to respond to the needs of unaccompanied children, thanks in part to Sr. Norma. Today, unaccompanied children are released into well-staffed camps that are run by various faith groups and Churches, a move Sr. Norma calls “a good step in the right direction.”

As rhetoric and politicking on the issue of immigration simultaneously heats up, Sr. Norma says that she, her team, and other sisters who work on the border have an important role to play. “I think we can make present the immigrants themselves, their faces, their stories, so that people can know they are not criminals, that they are people like you and I and that they deserve dignity and respect from all of us.”

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Questions for Reflection & Discussion on the Witness of Sister Norma Pimentel

What did/do you know about the situation of immigrants coming into the U.S. from Central America? How did this brief profile of Sr. Norma and her work inform you?

Upon arriving at the facilities set up by Sister Norma in Texas, families are welcomed with applause and a hearty “¡Bienvenidos!” (welcome!). How do you think this response makes people feel? Are you as eager to welcome? How can you be more welcoming of immigrant families in your community?

Sister Norma says, “My role and my only interest is for the person, the dignity of the human being.” In what ways can we be better about defending the dignity of immigrant families?

What more would you like to learn about Sister Norma or the situation for immigrant families from Central America? What will you do to learn more?



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“Families walking into our Humanitarian Respite Center at the Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, are welcomed with joyful applause, smiles, and greetings from volunteers who shout out “Bienvenidos!” Welcome! This welcome alone begins the transformation of restoring their dignity. Mothers and fathers are moved to tears from the overwhelming joy they feel from the volunteers who greet them with warmth and love.”

Sister
Norma Pimentel

In Her Own Words:

Sister Norma Pimentel’s Testimony before the United States Commission on Civil Rights

The summer of 2014 the Rio Grande Valley experienced overwhelming waves of immigrants coming to our border. No one expected the influx. Immediately, we at Catholic Charities looked to see how we could help. The first wave of immigrants came in June. The community responded to help the families who had been released to travel and had been dropped off at the bus station in McAllen, Texas. The immigrant families who had traveled for weeks, sometimes for over a month, on their journey north to a safer haven and who experienced all kinds of hardships, abuse, and emotional and physical injuries, found themselves in dire need of immediate care at the bus station.

Through the generosity and compassion of many, we were able to provide for their immediate and basic needs – a warm meal, a shower, toiletries, clean clothes, shoes, warm jackets, and blankets. We also provide them with food and drink for the next leg of their journey as they travel to connect with relatives in different states throughout the United States. Thanks to the City of McAllen, the city government’s mobile showers were setup on the premises. It is amazing to see the faces of the families after they have the opportunity to shower!

Most importantly, we helped restore the dignity and respect every human person deserves. Families walking into our Humanitarian Respite Center at the Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, are welcomed with joyful applause, smiles, and greetings from volunteers who shout out “Bienvenidos!” Welcome! This welcome alone begins the transformation of restoring their dignity. Mothers and fathers are moved to tears from the overwhelming joy they feel from the volunteers who greet them with warmth and love.

The community of the Rio Grande Valley, spearheaded by Catholic Charities, are continuing and will continue to help those who are allowed to travel. Some days there are more and some days less individuals to care for. To date, more than 16,000 refugees have been helped from 13 countries, the majority from Central America, in particular Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

At the beginning of June we were helping more than 200 individuals each day. While the numbers have dropped significantly, there are days when we receive close to 100 people and some days when we only see a few families. The numbers we help depends on the availability of space in the new holding detention facilities at Karnes City and Dilley, Texas. For the most part, families

are detained and kept in these facilities, rather than being immediately released to travel.

Among the overwhelming waves of immigrants, are thousands of unaccompanied children. These children were not released like the family units. Instead they were kept in the Border Patrol processing centers that became "holding facilities" until the proper "up to code" facility for unaccompanied children became available. In the early months of this year's wave of immigrants, the Border Patrol did not have a choice other than to keep the children detained for days, if not weeks, until a facility for unaccompanied children became available.

I visited the facility in McAllen, Texas, where great numbers of children were detained in those early months. My experience visiting that center was heartbreaking! It was very sad to see hundreds, if not thousands of children, of very young ages, detained in great numbers in small cells. The children's faces looking through large glass windows, all with tearful eyes. Dirty. Sad. Traumatized. All I could think about was what it must have been like for them to make such a long and difficult journey north without the care and comfort of a family member. And then to imagine how these children feel being detained under these conditions. Packed up like little sardines, with no space to even breathe.

I recall a child begging me, "Sáqueme de aquí! No puedo respirar!" "Please take me out of here! I can't breathe!" Seeing that child's face, I can only imagine how scared and frightened they all were. The children gathered around me, their faces full of tears, and I invited them to pray with me, and they did. Together we joined in one prayer. It was a powerful experience, so moving, even the officers who witnessed the children's response commented as I walked out of the cell, "Thank you for helping me to realize they are human beings!" Yes, they are children!

It is evident the Border Patrol were not prepared to respond to the overwhelming numbers of people who crossed into the United States. The processing facilities were not adequately equipped to handle the great number of immigrants who kept arriving. Unfortunately, the Border Patrol were not given any other option but to detain these children under these conditions. They did not have the proper facilities, space, or personnel, to handle the number of children. Border Patrol facilities became holding facilities, by default, but these facilities were not equipped to care for the children. They said they were doing their best, but unfortunately, for the children, it was not enough. The children needed care and attention the Border Patrol could not

provide.

Fortunately, a new facility for children was eventually opened. But it took several more months for Border Patrol to come up with a more adequate response to care for the children. The fact is, in those first few months this summer, there was no other option than to care for the children at these small, Border Patrol processing centers. It should not have been this way. A child should not have to experience this type of hardship at any time.

I am happy to say after my initial visit to the Border Patrol site the response from Border Patrol officials has been great. Border Patrol agents became extremely cooperative in working with Catholic Charities to meet the needs of the families released from detention. They notify us as to how many are being released so that we can appropriately prepare to care for them. They are open to listening and to helping to improve the situation at hand. And I do have some recommendations for consideration.

Recommendations:

1. A better response infrastructure needs to be developed now. We need to be better prepared for great waves of refugees in the future. Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, with the help of Catholic Charities USA, every local government entity, and numerous nonprofits, churches, and volunteers from our community, immediately came forward to respond and care for the refugee families being released. Other agencies can learn from this model. With the concern for the unaccompanied children the question remains, "Where was the Red Cross?" After these refugees were processed, why didn't the Red Cross become involved in providing shelter for these children? Should not the Red Cross respond in times of these types of crises, immediately?
 2. Detention is not our best option. More humane alternatives exist. Families are traumatized from their arduous journey. Families need to be reunited with their families and with their communities. There are organizations, like the Church, that have established and piloted community-based options that are viable alternatives to detention. There are many churches and communities who want to respond and sponsor these refugees in more humanitarian ways. They will ensure responsible care and legal processes are followed. Detention is not an effective tool for deterrence.
 3. Families should not be separated. Some of the policy directives Border Patrol is required to follow seem arbitrary and capricious, and cause undue duress for these already overwhelmed refugees. Countless numbers of families come through our
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center distraught because they have been separated from a family member. A husband and wife and their children journey together and cross the border at the same time, at the same point of entry. The mother and children are processed and released for travel. The father is detained. A grandmother crosses the border with her granddaughter, a child she has raised from birth, with the plan to reunite the child with her mother in New York. But grandmother and granddaughter are separated, leaving all distraught. Separation of families is hard to understand. We need to not break up the family. We need to allow families to stay together.

4. Counseling and pastoral care are needed. That type of care is not currently being provided in the processing centers. Border Patrol agents are not equipped to provide such care. We as pastoral agents of faith need to be allowed to be present with these children and families when they are being processed and detained because they are stressed. Many exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms from their experiences fleeing violence in their homeland and after their arduous travel to the United States. Many have been separated from other family members.

After my initial visit to the border patrol processing center in McAllen, Texas, Kevin Oakes, Chief Border Patrol Agent of the Rio Grande Sector, was supportive of the idea to make this happen. Our proposal was

to allow qualified members of all of the different faith denominations opportunities to go in and visit with the children upon entry, but nothing has materialized yet. This initiative never became a reality.

I would suggest many of the refugees are in need of this type of care. But children, especially, need this type of counseling and pastoral care because they are scared, frightened, and lost. They don't understand what's happening to them. Pastoral care volunteers would like to provide this emotional care but they do not have access and entry to the Border Patrol's processing facilities.

In conclusion, while the numbers of immigrants crossing the border are not at the levels we saw last summer, they continue to come. We must do everything possible to ensure they receive basic humanitarian care. Their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is in our hands.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Testimony of Sister Norma Pimentel, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (testimony of Sr. Norma Pimentel). January 2015.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

What did you learn about the situation for immigrants arriving from Central America from this testimony? What was most surprising to you?

What do you make of Sister Norma's recommendations? Sister Norma advocates for a stronger role for the Church and faith-based organizations. What unique gifts does the Church have for helping this situation?

What recommendations would you make given what you know about the situation?

Given the current political climate, what can we accomplish to create a more just and merciful solution? How can you be a part of such a solution?



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“We cannot deny the humanitarian crisis which in recent years has meant migration for thousands of people, whether by train or highway or on foot, crossing hundreds of kilometres through mountains, deserts and inhospitable zones. The human tragedy that is forced migration is a global phenomenon today. This crisis which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families. They are the brothers and sisters of those expelled by poverty and violence, by drug trafficking and criminal organizations. Being faced with so many legal vacuums, they get caught up in a web that ensnares and always destroys the poorest. Not only do they suffer poverty but they must also endure all these forms of violence.”

-Pope Francis,
Juarez, Mexico
February 17, 2016

Summary of **Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope**

In 2003, the episcopal conferences of the United States and Mexico released a joint pastoral letter addressing the issues of migration between the two countries.

We speak as two episcopal conferences but as one Church, united in the view that migration between our two nations is necessary and beneficial. At the same time, some aspects of the migrant experience are far from the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed: many persons who seek to migrate are suffering, and, in some cases, tragically dying; human rights are abused; families are kept apart; and racist and xenophobic attitudes remain. (2)

The bishops address migrants, “We stand in solidarity with you. We commit ourselves to your pastoral care and to work toward changes in church and societal structures that impede your exercising your dignity and living as children of God.”(9); public officials in both nations as well as personnel of both countries who enforce, implement, and execute the immigration laws; and the peoples of the United States and Mexico.

Chapter I America: A Common History of Migration and a Shared faith in Jesus Christ

Our continent has consistently received immigrants, refugees, exiles, and the persecuted from other lands. Fleeing injustice and oppression and seeking liberty and the opportunity to achieve a full life, many have found work, homes, security, liberty, and growth for themselves and their families. Our countries share this immigrant experience, though with different expressions and to different degrees. (15)

Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving. (19)

Chapter II Reflections in the Light of the Word of God and Catholic Social Teaching

The word of God and the Catholic social teaching it inspires illuminate an understanding—one that is ultimately full of hope—that recognizes the lights and shadows that are a part of the ethical, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of migrations between our two countries. The word of God and Catholic social teaching also bring to light the causes that give rise to migrations, as well as the consequences that they have on the communities of origin and destination. (22)

The key events in the history of the Chosen People of enslavement by the Egyptians and of liberation by God led to commandments regarding strangers (Ex 23:9; Lv 19:33). Israel's conduct with the stranger is both an imitation of God and the primary, specific Old Testament manifestation of the great commandment to love one's neighbor (25).

Recalling the migration of the Chosen People from Egypt, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph themselves were refugees in Egypt: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Mt 2:15). From this account the Holy Family has become a figure with whom Christian migrants and refugees throughout the ages can identify, giving them hope and courage in hard times.

St. Matthew also describes the mysterious presence of Jesus in the migrants who frequently lack food and drink and are detained in prison (Mt 25:35-36). The "Son of Man" who "comes in his glory" (Mt 25:31) will judge his followers by the way they respond to those in such need: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). (26)

Catholic teaching has a long and rich tradition in defending the right to migrate. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, the Church's teaching has provided the basis for the development of basic principles regarding the right to migrate for those attempting to exercise their God-given human rights. Catholic teaching also states that the root causes of migration—poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts—must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families. (28)

Both of our episcopal conferences have echoed the rich tradition of church teachings with regard to migration. Five principles emerge from such teachings, which guide the Church's view on migration

issues (33).

I. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need. (34)

II. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right. (35)

III. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows. (36)

IV. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority. (37)

V. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary. (38)

The Church recognizes the right of a sovereign state to control its borders in furtherance of the common good. It also recognizes the right of human persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given

rights. These teachings complement each other. While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible. It is through this lens that we assess the current migration reality between the United States and Mexico. (39)

Chapter III Pastoral Challenges and Responses

Toward Conversion

Our concern as pastors for the dignity and rights of migrants extends to pastoral responses as well as public policy issues. (40)

The whole Church is challenged to live the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-25), as they are converted to be witnesses of the Risen Lord after they welcome him as a stranger. Faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant leads to a conversion of mind and heart, which leads to a renewed spirit of communion and to the building of structures of solidarity to accompany the migrant. (40)

We bishops have the primary responsibility to build up the spirit of hospitality and communion extended to migrants who are passing through or to immigrants who are settling in the area. (42)

The building of community with migrants and new immigrants leads to a growing sense of solidarity. The bishop as pastor of the local church should lead the priests, deacons, religious, and faithful in promoting justice and in denouncing injustice towards migrants and immigrants, courageously defending their basic human rights. This should be true in both the sending and receiving churches. As leaven in the society, pastoral agents can be instruments for peace and justice to promote systemic change by making legislators and other government officials aware of what they see in the community. Working closely with other advocates for workers and with non-governmental organizations, the Church can be instrumental in developing initiatives for social change that benefit the most vulnerable members of the community. (43)

Ecclesia in America recommends collaboration

between episcopal conferences for more effective pastoral responses. Collaboration is most needed in the development of a more systematic approach to ministerial accompaniment of migrants. The numbers of migrants who leave Central and South America and Mexico and who enter the United States are so large that a more concerted effort is needed in the preparation of priests, religious, and lay leaders who accompany them. (48)

Chapter IV

Public Policy Challenge and Responses

The United States and Mexico share a special relationship that requires focused attention upon joint concerns. The realities of migration between both nations require comprehensive policy responses implemented in unison by both countries. The current relationship is weakened by inconsistent and divergent policies that are not coordinated and, in many cases, address only the symptoms of the migration phenomenon and not its root causes. (56)

We call upon both governments to cooperate and to jointly enact policies that will create a generous, legal flow of migrants between both nations. (57)

The bishops then offer several policy suggestions aimed at:

Addressing the root causes of immigration (59-63)

Creating legal avenues for migration (63-77)

Humane enforcement policies in both countries (78-100)

Conclusion

We recognize the phenomenon of migration as an authentic sign of the times. We see it in both our countries through the suffering of those who have been forced to become migrants for many reasons. To such a sign we must respond in common and creative ways so that we may strengthen the faith, hope, and charity of migrants and all the People of God. Such a sign is a call to transform national and international social, economic, and political structures so that they may provide the conditions required for the development for all, without exclusion and discrimination against any person in any circumstance. (102)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

This letter was written in 2003. If a similar document were released today, what do you suppose would stay the same? What would change? What would be added?

The bishops reflect on five principles that emerge from Catholic Social Teaching on the issue of immigration. Which of these encourage you? Which ones challenge you?

The bishops encourage Church communities and workers to promote justice and denounce injustice toward immigrants. They also recommend “a more systematic approach to ministerial accompaniment of migrants.” What does your faith community currently do to promote justice and provide for the ministerial needs of migrants? What could it do? How are you/could you be involved?

Where can you go to get a better understanding of the immigrant experience in your local community?

What more could the bishops be doing to promote the vision set forth in this document? How might you help them do these things?



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PRAYER Resource

Prayer Service for Welcoming the Stranger Among Us

Notes about this liturgy:

*** The readings included in this prayer service are based on the real-life experiences of women and children fleeing violence in Central America. The subject material and/or content may be emotionally difficult for some to hear or read. Please consider this information as you prepare your liturgy and as you invite others to attend.*

This would be an appropriate liturgy for the use of bi-lingual prayers and songs (Spanish and English) if it makes sense for your community.

Please plan to reflect the diversity of your community in this prayer service in whatever ways are possible.

This prayer service includes a guided meditation with the opportunity to write. Be sure to have paper and pens/pencils available for participants.

If you will be using the bread blessing and sharing ritual, read through that portion of the prayer service and consider how the ritual will proceed given your particular space.

Opening Song:

We suggest choosing an opening song that reflects upon the themes of unity and pilgrimage/journey. Some suggestions include:

Companions on the Journey by Carey Landry

They'll Know We Are Christians text by Peter Scholtes

The Servant Song by Richard Gillard

One Spirit, One Church by Maryanne Quinlivan, OSU and Kevin Keil

Introductory Remarks and Call to Prayer:

LEADER: We gather this day as God's Pilgrim People, on a journey toward holiness, toward peace, toward justice...toward the reign of God. And as such we place ourselves in solidarity with all those who find themselves in the midst journey. And we call to mind those who -- because of violence, war, inequality, lack of opportunity, and oppression of every kind -- find themselves strangers in a foreign land.

(a moment of silent reflection)

And so together we pray,

Opening Prayer:

ALL: Loving God, shelter of the homeless,

Your presence knows no bounds.

You walk with all who wander, who are lost, who seek safety, refuge, and new life.

No one is a stranger to you.

In you, refugees, victims of violence and oppression, those who are separated from their families, those who have been forced from their homes, and those who have run away from home find shelter.

Open our eyes and our hearts to their needs.

Give us a spirit of solidarity that we might journey alongside them to a place of peace, a place of justice, a place of holiness.

We ask this relying on your compassion

and confident in your love. AMEN

Liturgy of the Word

After each reading, sing a verse of "Open My Eyes" by Jesse Manibusan. We suggest either alternating between Spanish and English or singing both the English and Spanish text for each verse if appropriate for your community. Spanish language verses available at ocp.org.

Introduction: On March 4, 2016 Global Sisters Report held a video roundtable discussion with seven sisters who are leaders on immigration issues. Responding to questions about changing the tenor of the immigration debate in the United States and bridging the gap between Catholic Social Teaching and the attitudes of Catholics, Sr. Norma Pimentel said, "I think we can make present the immigrants themselves, their faces, their stories, so that people can know they are not criminals, that they are people like you and I and that they deserve dignity and respect from all of us.... Having people come and see and experience what is happening, for actually them to see the moms, the children and be part of that reality, it transforms them and brings the Catholic social teaching to life and understand more vividly their responsibility to be part of helping others and that responsibility we have to help all people."¹ Since many of us will not have the opportunity to travel to the border to see and experience what is happening, these readings offer a glimpse into the reality. We begin with the words of Pope Francis during a homily at the Mexico-U.S. border.

First Reading:

A Reading from Pope Francis' homily at Juarez, Mexico on February 17, 2016.

We cannot deny the humanitarian crisis which in recent years has meant migration for thousands of people, whether by train or highway or on foot, crossing hundreds of kilometres through mountains, deserts and inhospitable zones.

The human tragedy that is forced migration is a global phenomenon today. This crisis which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families.

They are the brothers and sisters of those expelled by poverty and violence, by drug trafficking and criminal organizations. Being faced with so many legal vacuums, they get caught up in a web that ensnares and always destroys the poorest. Not only do they suffer poverty but they must also endure all these forms of violence. Injustice is radicalized in the young; they are "cannon fodder", persecuted and threatened when they try to flee the spiral of violence and the hell of drugs. And what can we say about the many women whose lives have been unjustly robbed?

Let us together ask our God for the gift of conversion, the gift of tears, to give us open hearts like the Ninevites, open to his call heard in the suffering faces of countless men and women. No more death! No more exploitation! There is always time to change, always a way out and always an opportunity, there is always the time to implore the mercy of God.

Second Reading

A Reading from the Life of Norma, a woman from El Salvador.

The experience of Norma, the wife of a police officer from El Salvador, starkly illustrates the threats facing women and the lack of available State protection. Indeed, the police and their families are targets of violence in the struggle for power and control in El Salvador.

Before she fled to the United States, Norma lived in a neighborhood she describes as controlled by M-18, a powerful transnational armed group with a significant presence in El Salvador. She saw routine gun fights and murders between gang members and had to pay an increasing cuota every two weeks. About 15 days before she fled, a boy was murdered and left in the street near her house.

In late 2014, four gang members abducted her and took her to a nearby cemetery. Three of the four proceeded to rape her; she believes they targeted her because she was married to a police officer. "They took their turns....they tied me by the hands. They stuffed my mouth so I would not scream." When it was over, she said, "They threw me in the trash." She contracted a sexually transmitted disease as a result of the rape.

Her husband, the police officer, vowed revenge. They filed an official report. Norma became increasingly concerned that the groups were threatening her and her children, and that the police would not be able to protect her family. "[T]hey'd kill me. Gangs don't forgive....If they didn't harm me, they'd harm my children."

Norma tried to find safety by going to live with her aunt and uncle in another part of El Salvador. She changed her phone number and "never left the house." Nonetheless, she and her family were continually threatened. Having no other option, she and her husband decided that she should leave the country; she fled through Mexico with a coyote, or human smuggler. Before she left, she wanted to withdraw the police report, "so no one left behind would be hurt." However, Norma said her children, who still live with her husband, "are still being threatened."

Norma, detained in the United States at the time of her interview with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), described ongoing trauma from the rape. She stated that, "I feel dirty, so very dirty. This is why I wake up not wanting to live. I feel I have sinned, and this sin lives inside me....Sometimes, I wake up and think it was just a nightmare, but then I feel the pain and remember it was not."

Source: WOMEN ON THE RUN: FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF REFUGEES FLEEING EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, AND MEXICO
A Study Conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Web address: womenonthe.run

Third Reading

A reading from the life of Carlos, a teenage boy from Honduras

Upon getting off the train at the Mexico-Arizona border, 16-year-old Carlos*, his father, and a group of nine other adults were kidnapped by members of a drug cartel. Unknown to them at the time, the foot guide they had paid to help them flee to the United States was working with the cartel and had been leading them into danger the entire trip.

Carlos and his father had come to the United States to escape violence in Honduras. His father had survived repeated murder attempts by a man in their town and had been in hiding for the past several years. After his father fled to another city in Honduras, the man set his sights on Carlos, threatening him several times in the street. Carlos became afraid to leave the house for fear of what the man would do to him, so he and his father decided that they had no choice but to leave Honduras.

Just south of the U.S. border, Carlos and his father were held for several days in a basement, guarded by cartel members with guns. When they finally were allowed to leave, each was handed a backpack filled with marijuana and forced to carry it across the border into the United States. They were threatened that if they did not take the backpacks all the way to Tucson, they would be killed and their bodies would be left behind. They walked for three days in the desert in the sweltering August heat. They were barely allowed to rest and walked with guns pointed at them. Just outside of Tucson, they were caught by immigration officers. The Department of Homeland Security separated Carlos from his father and took him and other minors to a "hielera," a holding facility nicknamed "refrigerator" for the cold temperature at which it is kept. Despite repeated attempts by Carlos and his father to tell the officers what had happened to them, Carlos' father was deported back to Honduras.

Since Carlos no longer has family in the United States to care for him while he fights his deportation case, he remains in government custody and waits for a foster care placement to become available. He often is sad and worries about his father's safety. He understands that it will get easier with time but he still does not like to discuss what happened to him at the border. He fears that he will be judged or punished for handling drugs, so he is hesitant to talk about the terrifying experience.

Source: "The Untold Stories of Children Fleeing Central America." National Immigrant Justice Center. <https://www.immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/untold-stories-children-fleeing-central-america>

GOSPEL READING: Luke 24:13-32 "On the Road to Emmaus"

Response to the Reading:

Someone may preach on the theme of recognizing Jesus in migrants sharing their journey with them, by allowing them to share their stories with us and by sharing of ourselves with them. Or the group may wish to express their reactions to the readings.

Guided Reflection on "An Alien's Prayer" by Edward Hays

Begin by reading the prayer once through. Then you may read the prayer again by alternating between the prayer and reflection questions or you may distribute the questions or include them in your worship aid.

I wear the mark of your disapproval
and your often unspoken words
pierce straight to my soul,
"Why didn't you stay where you belong?"

Questions: What assumptions do you make about immigrants to the United States? Are they founded? What do you now know – that you didn't – about why people are leaving Central America and coming to the United States?

I feel the icy stare that says,
"Keep your distance, you foreigner,
with your different-colored skin
and your strange-sounding speech,
with your culture, food, religion, and clothing
that are inferior to my own."

Questions: What attitudes, prejudices, fears, or ignorance might you admit to harboring against immigrants and refugees? How do they manifest themselves? How might you overcome these?

I'm an immigrant, a wetback, an alien,
an outsider operating a sweatshop sewing
machine; cheap labor, unwanted or dirty jobs
are mine for the taking;
I'm one of the countless invisible ones
who puts fresh vegetables on your plate
or stitches the fashion dresses and shirts
that you buy in your stylish stores.

Questions: What do you know about the situation for immigrants once they arrive in the United States? What don't you know? How might you become more informed? How have you or might you personally benefit – knowingly or unknowingly – from the exploitation of immigrants in this country? How do you feel about this? What can you do about it?

As Moses of old once said,
"Remember, you were once aliens
in the land of Egypt,"
remember that your grandfathers and
grandmothers were immigrant unwantededs,
were exploited cheap labor,

second-class citizens,
uneducated and poor,
used and abused,
ignored or looked down upon
for their foreign religion, speech, and food.

Questions: What country or countries is your family from? Have you heard of the hardships they endured when they arrived in the United States? What opportunities were they afforded that allowed you to be where you are today? What gifts did they bring with them? Cultural? Religious? Intellectual?

How does your faith inform you on the topic of immigration?

The White House

first house of this great land,
says it well:
White is this land of promise;
no room for other colors or creeds. Someday
we'll paint the first house in rainbow colors—
someday, not long from now.

Questions: How informed are you on U.S. immigration policy? How can you become involved to influence change for a more just system?

A final question: Recognizing that we are all pilgrims on a journey toward holiness, what commitment can you make today to educate yourself about issues related to immigration or to take action to restore and assure the dignity of each person whether they remain in their home country or choose to migrate to the U.S.?

Allow time for reflection and or/writing. For the sake of time you might suggest that those gathered choose and reflect upon one question in addition to the final question during this time and bring the others to prayer with them later in the day or over the course of a period of time. Light instrumental music may be played during this time.

Once all have had the opportunity to reflect for a few moments gently bring the community's attention back..

If you will not be using the Bread Blessing and Sharing service you may allow time for others to share their commitment with the larger community or with their neighbor, and continue to the Petitions, Madre Nuestra, Sign of Peace (skip the bread sharing) and Closing Rites

Bread Blessing and Sharing Service

This service provides a way to ritualize the commitments that members of the community have made. Prepare for this ritual prior to the prayer service. You will need a loaf of bread, a table, and to construct a simple barrier reminiscent of "fence" or a "wall" (out of chicken wire, fabric, yarn, stones, bricks, or some other material). Construct or place the fence/wall/barrier in between a table with a loaf of bread on it and where the congregation will gather. Your set up does not need to be elaborate.. Simple small stones placed on the ground or table could be just as effective. If you plan on celebrating in the round, consider placing the bread at the center of the gathering with your fence or wall built around it.

After the guided meditation, allow time for the members of the community to share their commitment out loud (or in silence) and to help deconstruct the fence or wall (they may remove a block, cut away a piece of yarn, remove a stone, use a wire cutter to cut a piece of the chicken wire, etc.). Once all have had the opportunity to pray or share, and to deconstruct the barrier invite them to stay or gather around the table.

Blessing the Bread

LEADER: Blessed are you God of all creation, maker of all peoples, for through your goodness we have this bread to offer. May our sharing of this one bread be a sign for us of the unity, community, solidarity, justice and equal sharing you desire for all of your children.

ALL: Open our eyes to see you in the faces of refugees and immigrants; open our ears to hear your call to us in their stories; open our hearts that we may welcome them and journey with them. We ask this through Christ Jesus, AMEN.

Prayers of Petition

Response: God of all journeys, lead us to holiness.

For an end to the violence, oppression and poverty that displaces so many people from their homes and homelands, we pray

For migrant workers, that they may labor and live in safe and just conditions, we

For the families torn apart and separated by borders, that they be reunited, we pray

For an end to human trafficking, that the dignity of all God's children will be acknowledged and protected, we pray

For our law-makers, that they establish and enforce laws that protect the rights and dignity of everyone, especially those most vulnerable in our country, we pray

For employers and corporations, that they choose the dignity and worth of each human person over profit and power, we pray

For our faith community, that we may continue to serve those without homes and resources, and that we speak out for just immigration reform, we pray

Madre Nuestra: a prayer by Honduran women

ALL:

Our Mother,
you who are with us
ours, because you are all of us
You are not sanctified, but sacred, yes
like the mountains, the ocean,
the moon, the rainbow, the butterflies,
laughter and human bodies
Woman is your name,
a simple and beautiful name
Come with us to the reign of life,
and together, let us do our will
here, on earth, today
Let us attain and share today and always
our bread
And forgive ourselves
for all things
except our responsibility
Let us fall
into all temptations
that will build our hopes and dreams
And this way
together, strong and free,
let us move away from all evil

Sign of Peace

Leader: Mindful that peace, healing and mutual welcome among all peoples begins with each of us, we offer one another a sign of peace and welcome

All exchange some sign of peace

Bread Sharing

As the bread is shared, sing "In the Breaking of the Bread" by Bob Hurd alternating between English and Spanish, if appropriate.

Closing Prayer

LEADER: Let us Pray

Christ Jesus, who came into this world a migrant,
We ask you to grant immigrants, refugees, and other migrants protection, a place of welcome, and peace.

ALL: Open our eyes to see your face in the faces of all migrants,
Open our ears to hear your call to holiness in their cries for justice,
Open our hearts that in welcoming them into our lives we may also welcome you.

AMEN.

Closing Song:

Choose a song that is well known to the community and incorporates themes of unity, journey, discipleship. You may use one of those songs suggested for the opening hymn as well. You may also consider singing this closing song in Spanish.

¹ <http://globalsistersreport.org/news/migration/immigration-roundtable-discussion-full-transcript-38436>



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<http://www.catholiccharitiesrgv.org>

**View Global Sisters Report Roundtable on
Immigration**

<http://globalsistersreport.org/news/migration/immigration-roundtable-discussion-full-transcript-38436>

**Read the recommendations for faith communities
and for policymakers in Strangers No Longer, and
find ways to implement/advocate for them**

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm>

**Learn more about the immigrant population in your
community, find ways to learn more from them and
journey in solidarity with them.**

