

PRESENTATION ABOUT BORDER EXPERIENCE (diocesan pastoral ministers—Feb. 13, 2019)

I will share with you today why I went, what we did, some of my heartaches, and some of my hopes.

I will be using some references from Scripture because while I was there the daily Scripture Readings were so powerful—and so closely connected with what was happening every day in this ministry to the Refugees.

Bring glad tidings to the poor and set captives free.

Every day as the migrants got off of the ICE bus and walked into our facility, they looked rather dejected, hungry, ashamed, tired, and many were sick. They came in dirty smelly clothes, they walked with ankle monitors, they carried over their shoulders everything they owned in a trash bag; many carried small children in their arms or pulled toddlers along behind them. Practically everyone had colds, sore throats, sore eyes, coughs, headaches, etc...

BUT we, volunteers and staff, were there all lined up in the hallway, smiling at them, wishing them well, welcoming them, saying how happy we were that they arrived, telling them “Estas en tu casa” –the familiar expression that they use whenever they welcome someone into their homes. We reminded them: “You are safe here!!” And gradually the smiles appeared on their faces—smiles filled with gratitude and appreciation. They came in groups of about 40-65....sometimes 2 or 3 times a day.

They were guided into the dining room where we gave them a full meal that was tasty, warm, and plentiful. In the place of detention, where they are held until they have an interview to see if their case is accepted as credible fear from abuse or death threats from gang members, they were given one meal a day—if you can call it a meal—usually consisting of a cold burrito and a bottle of water. Sometimes it was a bowl of soup and water. Once in a while it was a sandwich. Often the children could not eat it—so they had gone for 2-3-4 days without eating. In one place the officers threw the burritos and whoever caught them could eat them. But—on the contrary—we celebrated “loaves and fishes” many times because just when we thought we had fed everyone, ICE would drop off another busload—and we had to start all over. So we scrambled to the kitchen for left overs and created some great dinners which they loved!! We did not do all the cooking though. Most of the time the meals were brought in by the generous families and restaurants and churches in El Paso. It was great food—and always so much!! I often thanked the groups for their kindness and generosity—but they always said—“no problem –we love doing this. We are happy to do it. We, here in El Paso, love having the migrants come. We do not want a bigger, higher wall. Not necessary. We are the safest city in the country.”

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect hospitality for thru it some have unknowingly entertained angels.

After they ate, we did an intake –to get all their information so that we could make phone calls to their families or to their sponsoring persons who would be paying for their bus ticket or plane fare. During this time I heard many stories about the difficulties of their journey, about how they almost wanted to turn back, about how they trusted in God to give them the strength they needed to continue, about possibly coming all this way and then being rejected by ICE, about their worries for their children’s safety and health through it all....about being on many different buses, walking part of the way, being in cattle trucks squashed together until they could get on another bus. But in spite of it all—there was a thread of gratitude to God for surviving the difficulties and challenges. They were not angry or mad at how they had been treated. They were all very

peaceful and grateful...**angelic, really**. So inspirational. If only people could understand—they are not criminals, they are not doing something illegal—what they are doing is very legal—they are our brothers and sisters, fleeing poverty and crime and persecution in their own countries—and they are coming to the points of entry and asking for asylum.

Jesus cures the man with the withered hand—(lady with only one leg-and a very withered heart)...

One of the ladies had only one leg and she walked with 2 crutches. She was desperate and crying – actually wailing as she entered our facility. She had brought her 8 year old grandson with her on the long journey...with a notarized paper saying that it was okay for her to bring the child with her, but ICE would not accept it because it was not a document that showed legal guardianship, so they took the boy from her. She just kept crying –asking us to help her find him and return him to her or send him back to Guatemala to his mother. I could hardly handle it when she just hung on me and wept begging for help for her baby who was lost. I got all the information about the child and took it to the directors of the Refugee House—but they said they couldn't do anything. I asked what would happen to him—they said he would be just another lost child in our system—but we couldn't tell her that. She left on a bus the next day to FL...not knowing—probably never knowing. I felt so helpless—it broke my heart.

On Jan. 25—feast of St. Paul...

(could it be possible that those in the ICE system and in our government could be jerked off their horses to see the light and be moved to compassion and care?)

After the intake process, they were taken to the used clothing room to pick out a clean set of clothes, then given towels and all they needed for showers, also sheets and blankets and personal items. They were shown to their rooms (this place was an old nursing home) where they found several mattresses and cots. All this stuff very simple—but they thought it was heaven. They hadn't slept on a bed in a very long time. And real blankets—that was an amazing treat—because in the detention places they have only the aluminum blankets and often slept on the concrete floor, which was extremely cold. They refer to those detention places as “hieleras”—refrigerators. When I showed a father and son the bathroom in their room, they were shocked and delighted to see a real toilet and a sink. They said that in the detention center, there was just a hole in the floor that everyone had to use.

The 10 lepers crying out, Jesus have pity on us—and immediately they were cleansed.

One day we went to see the wall. While there, we looked through the slats at the shacks on the Mexican side. We also saw a little old man walking timidly up to the wall from his shack. We smiled and greeted him. He came directly up to us –was he thinking: “have pity on me?” We reached out our hands thru the slats, looked into his eyes—and shook his wrinkled, crusty hand. What a blessed moment of connection,-- –country to country, sister to brother....the way it should be. Maybe he was cleansed in some way? I hope so. I know I was.

New wine in old wineskins....

So—new wine---what are my hopes, the new wine in old wineskins?

- That people can enter without shame and disgrace, but with dignity and heads held high
- Get rid of the ankle monitors
- That migrants can be fed and cared for properly in the detention places, or better yet...not be held in detention at all.
- That hospitality, not hatred-- becomes our country's chant
- That bridges of love and compassion are built, instead of walls of separation and distrust.
- That people may understand the truth about our immigrants—they are beautiful, peace-loving people who only want a better life for their children—namely education and some sense of safety from all the violence.

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