Life, and Mission, on the Border

By Julie Bourbon

Barabbas and Simon of Cyrene were pulled over by Immigration and Customs Enforcement while driving home one evening from a rehearsal of the Passion. They lacked proper documentation, so they spent the night in detention in South Texas. Jesus and one of the weeping women were in the same car; being American citizens, they were quickly released from custody.

All four called and texted their pastor, but cell coverage (like most utilities) is spotty to nonexistent in this stretch of the border, and it took him a while to figure out where his parishioners — the weeping woman was his secretary — had been taken. He stayed in the parking lot for five hours, into the middle of the night, until the two young men, brought to this country some 20 years ago, as babies, were let go.

“Sometimes, even going to church becomes a radical decision,” said Fr. Michael Montoya MJ, himself an immigrant, from the Philippines, and a member of the Missionaries of Jesus. He is the pastor of the St. Anne Catholic Community, made up of four parishes in the Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, at the southeastern tip of the border with Mexico. The men and women detained that evening were playing parts in the parish’s Holy Week celebrations.

Fr. Montoya was in the lead car, leaving a rehearsal at one of the churches, unaware that the vehicle behind him had been stopped. It might have been because the driver didn’t signal, or the license plate was dirty, or just because the officer suspected there were “illegals” in the car — he doesn’t remember. (This was before the recent passage of Texas State Bill 4 [SB4], which allows officers to ask anyone they suspect of a crime for their papers.) He waited faithfully for his friends to emerge from the detention center. Once released, they returned to their church communities, undeterred. This is their home. They are not strangers in a strange land.

The Third Wave

In 2007, the General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America at Aparecida, Brazil, gave the Church new direction in evangelization. It issued a document on mission, written in part by Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio — better known to the world now as Pope Francis — that emphasized being a Church for the poor, one that goes to the periphery and maintains Christ at its center. It describes a Church “in permanent mission.”

Fr. Gerald Kelly MM, a Maryknoll priest in Houston who just celebrated 50 years since his ordination, is a leader in this “third wave” missionary movement. He was sent to Chile as a young priest to establish Catholic parishes among the Mapuche Indians and turn them over to the locals (the tail end of the “second wave”). “I was a traditional missioner when I was ordained,” he said, his youthful voice belting his age. “It’s a different approach now.”

To that end, the Third Wave of Mission Institute, a United States Catholic Mission Association (USCMA) program in conjunction with Maryknoll, Catholic Relief Services, and a number of other mission organizations, has created new training modules for the three phases of mission: preparation, immersion/reflection while on mission, and reflection upon returning home. Modules cover the missioning process, culture, and twinning parishes. “Training the trainers,” as Fr. Kelly put it.

The Maryknoll Mission Council of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston sends out 12 lay mission groups. Some do direct evangelization in Guatemala, or medical mission work in Costa Rica. Many others do their work in the Houston area or in Laredo, Texas, on the border. They work with low-income families, people without access to healthcare.
and in need of social services or help with housing or language classes. Most are Spanish-speaking, and the missioners reach them through the local parishes.

“Pope Francis points out that we’re all missionary disciples, and we have a personal relationship with Jesus. But we’re also missionaries, and we go forth to share this love with others. Those are our core principles,” Fr. Kelly said, adding, “and of course, with the home repair, with medical missions, it’s Matthew 25 — feeding the hungry, visiting the sick. But the message is very important.”

And the message of border mission seems to be this: the marginalized must not be forgotten. “It's a mutuality in mission now, that we go to preach but also to learn from the people and to bring those messages back, to enable our society, our Catholic parishioners, to understand the imbalances that exist in our world, the separation between rich and poor,” said Fr. Kelly. “Our responsibility is to respond and create structures that don’t leave people behind in poverty.”

Today, countless men and women, lay and religious, are engaged in just that mission work to migrants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, living in solidarity and friendship with the people there. They are doing the “more” of mission. These are some of their stories.

The Border as Mission

The boundary that separates the United States and Mexico spans 1,954 miles of desert, river, mountains, wooded forests, and cities. One is as likely to build a stairway to the moon as to build a wall along its entire length.

“Here at the border, this has always been considered mission territory,” said Fr Montoya, who was previously executive director of the USCMA. “It is a very complicated setting of mission. Sometimes it’s almost like a caricature image of church here, when it’s presented on the national media. The realities are much more complicated than building a wall or having a river separate the two places.”

Montoya describes a vibrant, faithful community that exists in both north and south, with families spread among the four parishes over about 10 miles on the border, in towns with names like Pueblo de Palmas, Peñitas; El Flaco; and Los Ebanos. The pews are full on Sundays and first communion classes are packed with children; a youth encounter for which Pope Francis recorded a special video message recently overflowed with more than 500 “juvenes” in tents on the parish grounds.

“The people here, a lot of them have existed for many, many generations, even prior to the annexation of Texas,” he said, recounting the history of the area. “Some keep reminding me, ‘Father, remember we did not cross the border. The border crossed us.’”

One of the parishes, St. Michael the Archangel, will celebrate its 105th anniversary in September with a procession. Fr. Montoya expects a temporary border patrol tower to be erected, police cars to be stationed nearby, and helicopters and a blimp to hover overhead, as they did during last year’s procession. It’s a constant reminder that, even in church, which should be a sanctuary, the authorities can reach in and take someone they believe has no right to be there.

“The message the Church has here, one of the things we need to repeat time and again with our community, is our faith should be the thing that determines what we can and cannot do. Fear should
not dictate,” said Fr. Montoya. “If we live in fear, it will be difficult to do anything. It’s time to reclaim our community for our faith, our culture, our people. It's a deliberate missiological imperative.”

A Cross to Bear

In Douglas, Arizona, four members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Central Pacific Province, minister to migrants in the Tucson Diocese and in the State of Sonora, Mexico. These women came not to start a new mission, but to join an active one. That has meant working at a migrant center and shelter on the border, catechizing and leading communion services at the nearest prison, teaching English, leading citizenship classes, hosting visiting student groups in their home (a large, century-old convent), staffing a furniture-making business, and volunteering at a women's co-op in Mexico that was recently completed with 8,000 handmade adobe bricks. This last project was supported by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious’ border fund.

They are also taking part in prayer vigils to commemorate the lives of those lost trying to cross the desert into the U.S., called the Pilgrimage of Remembrance.

“The people in this community are witnessing and praying weekly about the fact that there are deaths in the desert right around us,” said Sr. Lucy Nigh SSND. She calls it “an act of mercy” to remember by name those individuals who died trying to cross to a better life. A local artist makes the white wooden crosses the group carries and plants at the GPS coordinates where the bodies were found. “We take a long time to remember and honor them, and pray for their families.”

When the sisters host groups of visitors, they “try to give them a picture of the complexity” of life on the border, said Sr. Judy Bourg SSND. “We stand on the side of compassion and understanding, and want to give some support to the stories of migrants, but we know that it’s not all just black and white.”

In that vein, they are friendly with a man who works for border patrol, and they usually try to introduce their visitors to him. “He works security and protects our country, but he is a person, also,” said Sr. Judy. “He’s able to tell our guests that he needs to do his job, but he will have some understanding for the migrants’ plight and treat them humanely and not take advantage of them.”

While many people think of migrants as criminals or drug dealers, Sr. Judy said, “regular migrants are very vulnerable to everyone,” and often are taken advantage of, robbed, and abused. “Our friend is an example of someone who doesn’t do that.”

Corporal Works of Mercy

They call it “La Bestia,” the train that carries migrants north from Latin America to the United States. Men and women (and children) risk life and limb to ride on the tops of the train cars; if they slip during the perilous journey (or are thrown), it means death or dismemberment.

At St. Michael’s Parish in Poway, California, near San Diego, parishioners who volunteer with the Corporal Works of Mercy program collect discarded prostheses to rehab into new legs, hands, and arms for people who’ve lost their limbs to La Bestia, or to illness, addiction, or accidents. The discarded artificial limbs — which might be worn out, or no longer fit the original wearer — cannot, by law, be reused in the United States.

The Mercy Prosthetics program has been running for about two years, and while it may literally be considered a “corporal” act of mercy (no pun intended), it is not the only way that St. Michael’s parishioners engage in mission along the border. They support a school
and an orphanage in Tijuana, and a soup kitchen that serves a hot meal to 1,500 individuals each day, many of them recently deported and living in “el bordo,” the Tijuana canal that separates the two countries.

Brigitte Beas works with the prosthetics program, which is run out of a medical clinic above the soup kitchen. There, people are fitted for their new limbs, which are cast in Tijuana and crafted in a small town three hours south by a man some call “The Wheelchair Angel.” A child victim of polio who dragged himself through the dirt at the orphanage where he grew up, “He has a big heart for mobilizing people,” said Beas.

Artificial limbs are expensive — Beas said a new knee might cost $10,000 — prohibitively so for people living on the margins in border territory. In the last two years, Mercy Prosthetics has provided free limbs for 130 people. Some have to return repeatedly to the clinic to get the right fit; ideally, they have a fitting with the limb artist himself, traveling there and back again on the $30 the clinic provides to cover the trip.

“It’s incredible, the stories, because most people just bleed to death,” when they fall from the train, said Beas. She recounted the tale of one survivor who slipped off at a crossroads in front of a Red Cross worker who was sitting in a car, waiting for the train to pass. The worker ensured the man received immediate medical attention, saving his life.

It is a profoundly moving experience “to see the dignity, the care, and attention,” people get when they are fitted with a prosthesis, Beas said. “People are ashamed and feel they’re a burden when they lose a limb.” Having a new one can change all of that, restoring not just dignity, but humanity.

### The Poorest of the Poor

Fr. Jesse Esqueda OMI, ordained three years ago into the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, also works in Mexico, in La Morita, Tijuana, at the San Eugenio Mission. “We are the poorest and the biggest parish of the diocese,” he said. “We go from poverty to extreme poverty.”

Lack of infrastructure and good schools is a challenge, as is healthcare and care for the disabled. And yet, there is hope.

It’s difficult for his parishioners to get out of poverty — many of them work six days a week in factories, or maquiladoras, earning $65 for their efforts. But the parish has started a youth scholarship program, and 100 kids are now in college in Mexico, studying to be engineers, lawyers, and doctors, Fr. Esqueda said.

More than 300 participate in the San Eugenio Mission youth program. “It’s a beautiful thing, because the Church is alive and the young people are just really excited to be part of it,” he said. Weekend youth retreats are full to capacity.

Recently, the group changed its ministry charge from mission “for” youth to mission “with” youth. “That changes the way we look at things,” he said. “This is a mission with the people, working with them. They take ownership. And of course, at the heart of the mission is the good news of the Gospel.”

It's an important distinction, said Fr. Esqueda, as is the emphasis on caring for his parishioners on both the physical and spiritual plane.

“First, we help them to be fully human, then Christians, then saints,” he said. “So we have to worry about their human needs — shelter, education, medical care, housing. And then as Christians, spreading the Gospel, being able to provide hope, faith formation. And then as saints, helping to bring out the best in them and helping them become missionaries.”
A Humanizing Presence

The Kino Border Initiative — “the Church without frontiers” — lies on the border, in Nogales, Arizona. Founded by the Jesuits in 2009, the staff focuses on education, research and advocacy, and humanitarian assistance. “Our mission is to be a humanizing presence,” said Fr. Sean Carroll SJ, the executive director.

The Jesuits did not enter into this space lightly, spending more than 18 months asking two questions of those in both the north and the south: what are the greatest needs you’re seeing around the issue of migration, and how can we help?

Fr. Carroll said there was a definite pattern to the responses. There were tremendous humanitarian needs in Nogales/Sonora, a central point of deportation, including care for vulnerable women and children, pastoral support, advocacy for those abused by Mexican police or denied access to the asylum system in the U.S., and a general need for bi-national organization to facilitate cooperation along the border.

“We trusted that God would speak to us through the people we were interviewing to give us a sense of whether we were welcome here or not,” said Fr. Carroll. The response was overwhelmingly positive. It was a call, an invitation, to be in solidarity. Although the timing was not necessarily fortuitous—Carroll noted dryly that they began this new mission during a global recession—they had faith that this was exactly where God was calling them to be.

“We’ve been sent by God to address a very important need and to do that on the border, he said. “Our work is very much in the spirit of what Pope Francis has talked about in terms of encounter, to encounter the other, and to be transformed in the process. I think that’s happened for us. These encounters are what help us continue to be faithful to this mission and to facilitate encounters for others who come to see and are transformed by the experience, as well.”

A U-Turn

Sr. Pamela Marie Burganski SND recalls it was a missed turn that brought three teenage migrants into her life in Alamo, Texas.

“I made a wrong turn and immediately set to correct myself, and by doing that had to make a u-turn, and in making the u-turn, saw someone sort of collapsed down to the sidewalk,” said the plainspoken Sr. Pam, now in her third year of mission work in Alamo, Texas. “I am called to see the person in front of me and to respond when that is what is in my heart to do.”

The young woman had a violent migraine, and Sr. Pam transported her and her two siblings to the doctor, and then to lunch. A friendly relationship was begun, rides were offered, housekeeping advice was given. “They’re managing,” she said of the young people whose mother left them years ago and whose father remains in Mexico with another, disabled, sibling.

This is the first time Sr. Pam’s religious community, the Sisters of Notre Dame, has had a ministry in Texas. They arrived three years ago, six of them, and, like the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Arizona, they looked to join an active ministry, not found one of their own. “We have been looking for the poor and how we might assist without establishing an institution, but working with an existing one,” she said. “It’s an attempt to match gifts with availability.”

Next year, she’ll be the only one of her community still in South Texas. A member of the Toledo, Ohio, province, she has tutored, organized classes, offered good counsel, and engaged in civil disobedience, most recently getting arrested in Austin, at the governor’s office, to protest the passage of SB4. “We did not go to prison, we were not hauled off in police cars, and everyone was on their very best behavior,” she said drolly. She’s uncertain what awaits her in another year.

Her ministry seems almost like an informal one, but for the migrants whose lives it touches, that engagement can be the difference between life and death, being seen and being invisible.
“We really are searching for ways to be present with and of assistance to the immigrant population and the poor, as we can find them here in south Texas,” she said. “They tend to consist of simple things, like transporting someone who collapses on the sidewalk to the doctor. That’s not something you could have planned when you set out your daily schedule.”

**Prophetic Voices**

Lying just on the other side of the border from Juarez is the Hope Border Institute, in El Paso, Texas. “It’s sort of one big city,” said director Dylan Corbett. “You can’t tell where El Paso begins and Juarez ends. They’re linked culturally, economically, socially, and in terms of faith. The faith is really important to people.”

The Hope Border Institute focuses on advocacy for more just policies, leadership development of young people, and research into the causes of poverty and injustice. Corbett, who worked previously at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., points out that although issues like NAFTA and the movement of factories into (or out of) Mexico may seem abstract to most Americans, for people living on the border, they have real-world consequences on their daily lives.

“Here, the effects of these broken policies are really on display,” he said, in the economic system that generates inequality and poverty, and in the immigration system that separates families.

Corbett reflected on Pope Francis’ visit to the border — the frontera or periferia — in 2016, and the message of hope and dignity he brought to the marginalized living there. The Pope reminded them that they are not less than.

“Those who live an existence in mission, far from home, actually have a prophetic voice. They can be prophets of a better future. They have something to say. We really believe that,” said Corbett. “That’s what life in mission is, you’re a prophet of a better future. People who live in mission territories are poor, economically speaking, but their cultural and religious and social heritage is rich. There is a beauty to border existence. We must pay attention to the borders. It’s a beautiful thing and that’s what God is calling us to do.”

**About the Author:**

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