



# ENCOUNTER

*Catholic laity on mission – everywhere*

October 2021

Peace be with you. USCMA is in the middle of **Angels Unaware**, a virtual dialogue on mission and migration. Using the pastoral circle – the see, judge, and act process – the participants are dialoguing with ten speakers on the reality of migration in our world, along the US southern border, and in our own neighborhoods. They have meditated on the Word of God and considered the “cloud of witnesses” who, over the last 100 years, have featured the immigrant in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church. On the last day, they will learn the various ways the Church has responded to the needs of the migrant and discern their own response – personally, as a missionary community, and through USCMA.

In this issue of ENCOUNTER we look at the story of lay men and women – from various parishes in the Diocese of El Paso – and how they “welcome the stranger.” Don McCrabb, in his reflection on the tradition article, explores how the migrant calls the Church to conversion – as well as those of us who call ourselves missionaries.

**Angels Unaware** is a dialogue on mission and migration. It is a point in time and God has blessed it with its own graces. It is also an ongoing dialogue because, although we have seen the reality of the migrant, there is still more to see. We have heard the word of God, but there is still more to hear. We will discern how to act – even as we evaluate and celebrate the many ways we have already responded to the needs of the migrant – so the arms of the Church reach out for a “wider we.”

Missionaries, in the Name of God, make room for the migrant, make room for the dialogue!

## Serving Migrants in El Paso

The people of El Paso, Texas, are understandably proud of the city’s reputation as a welcoming place—and not just to visitors, but to migrants and refugees, as well. Whenever the latter have arrived, no matter the state or federal government response, residents—many of them church-affiliated volunteers—respond with compassion, as well as with hot meals, warm beds and clean clothes.

“These people, they are giving of themselves one hundred percent, and doing all of this amazing stuff,” says Marco Raposo, director of the Peace and Justice Ministry of the Diocese of El Paso. He says their actions inspire others to give, having a ripple effect.

“Their generosity is just beyond belief. It’s like a pebble in a lake.”

Although he says not every one of the diocese’s 56 parishes has a migrant ministry—some might work with the St. Vincent de Paul Society or other organized ministries, for instance—many do, and they mobilize when called upon.

“By and large, all parishes respond at their capacity—smaller, larger, wealthiest, poorest,” he says. “They all respond, and sometimes the poorer ones give a hundredfold of what they have, which is amazing.”

In September, when tens of thousands of Haitian refugees arrived at the U.S-Mexico border, with about





Above: Volunteers organized donations of clothing.

Left: Migrants gathered in a modest prayer space at the hospitality center.

2,000 of them ending up in El Paso, Marco was given one night's notice that 600 would be coming to the city over the span of a week. The threat of imminent deportation hung over their heads, so Marco started calling his most dependable volunteers to help at a hotel-turned-shelter.

"Marco knows we always go whenever he needs us. And as soon as I send the list, in less than 30 minutes, everyone responds," says Lorena Bencomo who, with her husband, is part of the migrant ministry—she's the director—at their parish, Mother Cabrini.

"We can't say no," she adds, laughing, "because Mother Cabrini is the patron saint of migrants!"

Her group regularly serves food at shelters to migrants awaiting travel to their family or sponsors in other parts of the country. Even during the pandemic, Lorena says, when they couldn't actually serve the food, they still provided it. They also regularly collect and sort clothing and children's toys.

Robert and Eva Salinas are parishioners at San Antonio de Padua and active with their migrant ministry, which received a pre-pandemic request from Ruben Garcia of Annunciation House to sponsor a migrant hospitality center. It took just a few weeks to recruit about 100 volunteers—some from other parishes, some not even Catholic—and get up and running.

"If it's a calling from God, it's doable," says Robert. They were among those whom Marco called to aid the Haitians in uniting with their sponsors, and to send volunteers to play with Afghan children refugees housed on a military base in September. "We just reached out and the Lord provided."

When the pandemic hit, Robert says, their group found new ways to engage. Their parish center has provided

weekly free breakfasts and social activities for neighborhood seniors. They've also worked with local businesses and nonprofits to rehab the trailer of a prospective adoptive parent and to convert a garage into a suitable bedroom for a 5-year-old disabled foster child.

Their work has involved many unexpected blessings. "We call on anybody who comes across our paths," he says with enthusiasm. "You know, people are good! They say, 'yes, I'll help you!' And the Lord's work gets done."

El Paso native and Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio Becky Perez is a member of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel parish as well as a longtime teacher. She notes that five Catholic schools and one Christian school recently collected brand new toys for more than 3,000 Afghan children refugees, a word she uses deliberately.

"I don't even call them migrants anymore. Anyone seeking a better life in the United States is a refugee," she says of the people they encounter only briefly before entrusting them to God and sending them on their way. "They're our brothers and sisters, and we're going to keep helping them."

Sister Becky credits the laity for doing so much to support this ministry.

"I keep telling them, you're writing history, because the Church does belong to you, it belongs to all of us," she says of the many lay volunteers she works with. "I try to help out, and if I can't, I find people who can."

She adds, with the pride of a native, "El Paso is a warm and friendly place. The people I'm surrounded by really know how to live the Gospel."

*Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor*



Although the dialogue is over, the 10 plus sessions were recorded. [REGISTER](#) to have full access to these videos, the handouts, and the proceedings. Connect to the dialogue and mission with people on the move! More details at: [www.uscatholicmission.org](http://www.uscatholicmission.org).

## Mission and Its Perfection: The Migrant Challenge to Missionaries

By Dr. Donald R. McCrabb

***The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe this good news.***

What is the arc of mission? While the answer to this question involves history, it is much more than a historical question about mission. Rather, it is a question that raises the telos—or the “final end”—of mission and, more immediately, the trajectory or the path to that end, which will either affirm or challenge our plans and intentions.

An immediate question to the question is: What is meant by mission? Mission, seen from an organizational perspective, concerns the fundamental purpose of an institution. In this reflection, the concern is about the divine mission. This is the mission of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and entrusted to the Church. Through the eyes of faith, the divine mission is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic and, humbly, the mission that is above all other missions, holds and perfects those missions and, ultimately, gives them their dignity and worth.

It is also fair to ask if this is a valuable question for missionaries to even ask themselves. Isn't there more than enough to do than to pause and consider such a lofty—perhaps even unanswerable—question? Engaging this question—“What is the arc of mission?”—reveals the dynamic, perhaps even the charism, of mission.

The Church just celebrated the Feast of St. Therese of Lisieux, one of the two patron saints of mission. St. Therese's “the little way” was rooted in a deep humility and an expansive missionary heart. Her childlike surrender to Christ, who bends down to lift her up, as a father would his toddler child, also unleashed within her a passion for mission—to preach the Gospel everywhere for all time. St. Therese knew that humility must guide the missionary. This stance, this orientation of the missionary, is echoed in the Prayer of Saint Romero, “We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.” *Believe this good news.*

Reality over ideology is one of the principles Pope Francis relies on in his own pastoral reflections and actions. The reality before us—what we can clearly see, hear, touch, smell, taste—must come before any explanation or interpretation of that reality. One of the many realities the Church must face, here in the United States and around the world, is the growing number of migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. *The Kingdom of God is at hand.*

This month, USCMA is hosting a dialogue on mission and migration. “Angels Unaware: Mission with People on the Move” wants to invite all missionary disciples to see the reality of the migrant, the immigrant, the refugee, and the asylum seeker. There are a lot of people “on the move” all over the earth. Marco Raposo, the director of Peace and Justice for the Diocese of El Paso, frequently stresses that “what we are dealing with is forced migration. These people *have to move.*” How will the American Church respond through its vast network of institutions: parishes, schools, universities, hospitals, charities, religious orders—the list goes on.

All Catholics are called to “see” the reality of the migrant. Missionaries—those called and sent by the Church to do the missionary work of the Church—must seek out the migrant on the peripheries of any society. In the United States, it is easy to assume that the migrants are only on the southern border. They are also in our neighborhoods and even in our churches. Fr. Aniedi Okure, OP, former executive director of the African Faith and Justice Network, liked to tell the story of his conversation with one of the bishops who said “there were no African Catholics” in his diocese. Fr. Aniedi was happy to share with him a list of “African Catholics” who were members of the cathedral parish. Missionaries are called to be with and for the migrants among us—to enter their reality—just as much as they are called to proclaim,

serve, and witness to God's reign of love, salvation, and justice to people in another state or another country. Sometimes, the most difficult border to cross is the one right next door.

The reality of migrants calls missionaries to conversion. Missionaries must open themselves up to the changing realities before us. Conversion is hard. It forces us to open our eyes, to see differently. Missionaries must challenge themselves to see beyond their own horizons. This means they must turn away from the familiar, the predictable, the manageable. Missionaries are dealing with a tremendous amount of human suffering. It is hard to "look around" and see the suffering of others. Conversion is also freeing. Again, the Prayer of Saint Romero: "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well."

The "angels" in our midst also calls the US Church to conversion. Ministry – no matter how welcoming, inclusive, or engaging – will be an inadequate response to the migrant. Mission – the Church's willingness to go outside of itself, to step outside of its comfort zone, to cross some type of border (cultural, linguistic, economic, political), to be in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place for the well-being, the integral human development of another, is the Church's best response.

The "final end" of the divine mission has been described in countless ways: the final days, the new Jerusalem, the messianic feast, heaven. There are some intermediate steps along the way. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin talked about it this way: "We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time." Thomas Merton believed that his desire to please God was, itself, pleasing to God since, "I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end."

Saint John Henry Newman echoed these sentiments: "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons." Newman also said, "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

Mission finds its perfection in its ability to change often. It begins with humility, which opens heart and mind to see reality as it really is. Faith tells the missionary that God is in that reality and that it is in that reality that the "kingdom of God is at hand." This is the joy of the Gospel. There is nothing that is truly human that is foreign to God, and it is only in God that we come to know what it really means to be human. It is with eyes wide open, holding a gifted, suffering, sinful, and saintly humanity, that the missionary discerns "what is theirs to do" and acts with joyous abandon. *Repent.*



*Donald R. McCrabb, D. Min., is the Executive Director of the United States Catholic Mission Association.*

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## USCMA Happenings

- 11.03.2021 **USCMA Board of Director Meeting.** The Board will gather to begin a process of conducting a strategic assessment of USCMA's mission and services. Please keep the work of the Board, on behalf of the association, in your prayers.
- 11.16.2021 **Synodality – A Webinar – 2 pm ET** | Deacon Francis L. Agnoli and Patrick Schmadeke, who launched the synod process in the Diocese of Davenport, will be joined by Colleen Dulle, from America Magazine, and Sr. Francois, CSJP, from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, will review the history of the synod, the vision of Pope Francis for this Synod on Synodality, and practical ways missionaries can participate – in their own right as a missionary community within the Church and as members of the local church. This webinar is free to members. [REGISTRATION](#) is required.
- 11.25.2021 **Thanksgiving.** USCMA wishes you a blessed Thanksgiving. May you come together in peace with friends and loved ones and marvel, with deep gratitude, at the many blessings the good Lord has given us. May this time awaken in all of us the gift of generosity.

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The United States Catholic Mission Association is a national alliance of individuals and organizations committed to the mission Jesus entrusted to his Church. Through its members and services USCMA animates missionaries, prepares them for mission, accompanies them through mission, and forms them for leadership. ENCOUNTER is made possible in part, by a grant from [Catholic Communication Campaign](#). You build bridges of global solidarity by supporting USCMA. Donate at [uscatholicmission.org](http://uscatholicmission.org). Copyright 2020.



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